

The book cover features a central illustration of a young woman with blonde, wavy hair, wearing a blue, short-sleeved, backless dress. She is looking over her shoulder at the viewer while holding a small, glowing golden key in her right hand. The background is a lush, fantastical forest with large, colorful mushrooms (pink, purple, and blue), glowing blue light sources, and dense foliage. The entire cover is framed by an ornate, teal-colored border with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns.

DANI HOOTS

TRAPPED
— IN —

WONDERLAND

WONDERLAND CHRONICLES
BOOK ONE

TRAPPED IN WONDERLAND

Wonderland Series: Book 1

Dani Hoots

Trapped in Wonderland

Wonderland Series, #1

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**“One of the deep secrets of life is that all that is really worth the doing
is what we do for others.”**

— Lewis Carroll

CHAPTER 1

I was falling

Or at least I think I was falling. It didn't feel like gravity pulling me down and down, but more like something decided it wanted to sweep me off my feet. Kind of like in ballet when one of the guys would pick me up—sometimes for the routine, sometimes because they wanted to scare the crap out of me. I *hated* when they did that. You know, that feeling in your stomach where you don't know if you are gonna hurl or if your stomach was just gonna move into your throat.

So you can imagine my confusion when it wouldn't stop. *At all*. Not only that but inside the abyss I currently found myself in there were spiraling colors shooting out every which way. At least they were pretty though, mainly softer colors versus the neon colors that one expected in such a situation. Yes, I watched a lot of anime and sci-fi. Don't judge me. Anyway, I made a mental note to paint them later. That is, if I survived.

Oh, I should probably introduce myself. I'm Alice Hughes, or at least that was the name I went by anyway. My real name is Meredith, but I always go by my middle name. *Can you blame me?* Regardless, I'm a freshman at East Salem High School, go Hunting Owls! At first I thought an owl was a bit stupid for a mascot, but an owl actually attacked a bunch of people in the park in downtown Salem, Oregon. I now appreciate, *and fear*, owls.

You may be wondering how I got into this mess, how I was falling (and falling and falling), and why I couldn't stop. Honestly, I had no idea and was wondering the same thing as well. All I could remember was running out of the school, excited as it was a nice autumn day and I needed to bike to ballet and practice my splits. Then Kate, my best friend since grade school, asked me if I remembered my ballet shoes from my locker (wasn't the first time I had forgotten them after all). Then I slammed my palm to my face and hurried back into the school...

Oh, that's right. I had seen a group of boys open a locker and step inside, ones who'd just transferred to the district this year. Why the heck anyone would do such a thing and end up going to this school was beyond

me. Perhaps it was the same kind of people who disappear into lockers, which defied the laws of physics by the way. Or, at least, I think it did (science wasn't my best subject). Either way, it led me to believe I had eaten some bad mushrooms or something. Then, of course, curiosity got the better of me and I went to see what was up with the locker and now I found myself falling... And falling... and... falling.

The feeling didn't seem to want to stop either, and when I looked down, there didn't seem to be an end to the abyss. I supposed that's why they called it an abyss. I glanced around every which way and honestly I had no idea which way was up or which way was down. It left me feeling a bit disoriented and I prayed that my lunch wouldn't come back for a visit. That would make this situation so much worse.

As I fell, *or maybe floated?* I decided that was a better description of the situation. So as I floated, I wondered if this was what the people in space felt like, while experiencing zero-gravity. I always wondered what it would be like in space, though I probably would never find out. That is unless NASA started hiring artists to man their spacecraft. That would be the day.

"Crap!" The swirls of color had gone away and there was nothing but darkness. I felt a slight tug and came out of whatever inter-dimensional plane I had been in. I figured that's what it had to have been, especially after watching so many sci-fi series and anime over the years. I had become something of an expert on all matters of what fictional stories were made of, and if I didn't know better, I was in some kind of strange new world. That, or I had hit my head somewhere at school and was knocked out cold and this was all a dream, which really was much more likely. But I wouldn't be careless, just in case. If I saw a pink-haired girl like in an anime, I was going to run away from her as fast as I could. Pink-haired girls always brought disaster.

Whatever I landed on was soft. I gently touched it, as I was still surrounded by darkness. I felt around me, curious as to what I had landed on. It felt short, almost like grass. It was not light enough to tell but I was pretty sure it was grass, I did live in Oregon after all. I took a breath. Yes, it was grass all right. It gave off that aroma of summer.

Well, that was one question answered, but I still had no idea where I was. Blackness surrounded me and I felt lost, even more lost than that time I took a wrong turn in Portland, leading me away from my 7th grade field

trip group. Thank goodness for cell phones. Speaking of which, I pulled mine out and turned on the flashlight function. I hated the dark, it felt like solitude, like nothing could help you escape from the dangers that lurked around. It absorbed everything and made me want to cry. I didn't, but I sure yearned to.

Examining my surroundings, a bit closer now that my slight anxiety attack had subsided, I found that it was indeed grass I was standing on. How weird, as this seemed to be some random room, a closet almost, other than the fact there wasn't anything in here but me. The walls were plain and white and that was all there was. I focused the light up to see where I could have fallen from, but all I found was a white ceiling. *How was that even possible?* This had to be a dream.

Shining my flashlight around, I noticed a doorknob on one of the walls. The door was so flush to the wall that I couldn't even make it out. I prayed that it was indeed a door and not a shower handle like in the movie *Clue*. The things I worried about, I swore.

I headed towards the door and as I moved forward, I felt something hit me right in the forehead, knocking me back a step.

"Ouch!" I placed my hand over my right eyebrow where it had hit. There was going to be a giant lump there, I just knew it. At least there was no blood, at least that I could tell. I shone the flashlight up at it. Sure enough, I missed the only thing in this room, a giant pipe that spanned across the room right in front of the door. Rubbing the slight bruise, I just hoped my luck would get a little better, which seemed unlikely at this point.

I grabbed the door knob. It was cool and smooth, just like a door knob should be, so hopefully this was indeed a door. Saying a slight prayer, I twisted and pulled inward. It didn't budge. I sighed. It swung out, not in. I always found myself doing that, even if there's a sign. I took another deep breath and pushed outwards.

It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the bright light. It stung, just as it always did when the sun came out on a rare autumn morning. And for some reason, my left eye adjusted faster than my right. I never did figure out why that was. Once both eyes no longer burned, I couldn't believe what I saw. The scenery that lay before me was a city, but definitely not the city of Salem that I was familiar with. No, this was something much more magical, like something out of a fairytale.

Giant buildings made of glass and steel towered overhead, disappearing up into the sky, so high it seemed like they wouldn't be able to. They weren't the typical straight, rectangular buildings like that of my hometown, but spiraled and bulged out each and every way. If an engineer were here, they would be scratching their head. Even my sister who was majoring in physics would have no explanation. I had never seen anything like it.

The buildings closest to me appeared transparent, where I could see everyone who was in the building, but much of the un-glazed parts of the buildings were covered in vegetation. Ferns, grass, ivy, roses; name it and it was here. I gasped at the fact that all this could exist, and it was spectacular. I wished that more cities throughout the world looked like this. It felt so refreshing compared to the normal concrete and brick. The aura relaxed my mind and soul, and I almost forgot I was in another land.

I stepped out onto the street to find that the roads themselves were also covered with grass, just like the room I had left. It was the most beautiful green grass that I had ever seen, something you would only expect from turf. No weeds, no dry spots; perfect. Along with the grass, flowers of all types lined the streets; blue star creeper, cranesbill, primrose, and that was just the ones I recognized.

Looking forward, I found something even stranger. The people here dressed as if they stepped straight out of a Victorian novel. The women wore frilly skirts and dresses of all types and colors, both bold and neutral. The men wore suits with large top hats and chains looped from their coat button to their pocket, indicating they were carrying pocket watches. None of this was the typical scenery of little old Salem. It'd be pretty cool though, but very doubtful.

I took a few more steps. The grass felt soft under my shoes and I was afraid I was going to step on some blooming flower. As I glanced to see how others dealt with this problem, I noticed they weren't wearing any shoes. *How peculiar.*

This place also didn't smell like a city. It smelt like the forest, or a meadow, no fumes or smog or pollution. My lungs, for once, felt clean and the fresh air felt so great that I wished my home was the same. I could even smell the roses that were across the street because the air was so fresh.

The street was busy, people conversing and walking towards their destination. Laughter and voices echoed through the area. I tried to see if I

could get a glimpse of the edge of the city but didn't see an end to this madness. I knew I needed to find my way out of here, or at least find out where I was. Then I could find my way back home, that is if this wasn't some silly dream.

Deciding it was best to simply ask a person where I was, I approached a woman in a pink ruffled skirt. Her buttoned-up blouse was a matching pink with white threaded designs of cherry blossoms. Her blonde hair was done in tight curls and she had a headpiece with cherry blossoms weaved into it. She even smelled like cherries.

"Excuse me, Miss, can you help me? I think I'm lost."

She turned to face me and I froze. Her face was shrouded in darkness, like a mask. I couldn't see her eyes, or nose, not even her mouth. It was as if light didn't hit it and all I could see were the shadows that had consumed her features.

She hurried off, ignoring my question completely. Maybe it was because I stared at her in horror or because she simply didn't want to talk? Or was it obvious that I didn't belong here? Especially since I wasn't wearing anything close to what those around me wore...

Curious, I took another look around. I don't know how I didn't notice before, but I could not see the face of anyone around me. Had I gone face-blind? Or was this some kind of custom of the people here? All I knew was that a cloud of darkness covered their faces and I couldn't tell any of them apart. Fear, confusion, you name it, I was feeling it and all of it told me that I should run.

I started running through the crowd. I didn't know why, it just seemed like the thing to do. I shoved past all the faceless people, trying to find an escape. It didn't help that I didn't know where I was nor where I needed to go. All I knew was that I wanted to get away from here. Maybe I could find the way to the outside of the city, if I traveled in one direction long enough.

The citizens of the city all stared at me as I pushed my way through their groups, at least I think they stared at me. Their heads were turned towards my direction, so if they did have eyes I would presume I was in the center of their attention. It made me shiver that so many eyes were on me yet I couldn't see any of them. Could they even see me or was I complete darkness to them?

It was probably a stupid idea to run and I should have just calmly tried to figure out what was happening, but all the confusion hit me at once. What if I couldn't find a way home? What if I was stuck here forever? What if something happened to me, and my family never found out the truth? My heart was beating fast now and all I could do was try to run away from my worried thoughts.

And that's when I heard someone yelling after me.

"Stop! Stop her! She's an outsider!"

I debated stopping for a moment, especially since I had no idea what I was doing, but then I remembered all the fictional stories with outsiders getting captured and being thrown into prison. That's what always happened, right? Besides, they didn't sound like they wanted me to stop and have a spot of tea or something. They sounded like I was a criminal and they needed to apprehend me. I didn't want that so I kept moving forward and didn't let anything stop me, or at least try and not let anything stop me.

As if fate heard my thoughts the moment they were projected into the universe, I felt something grab me and pull me into an alleyway at a distance from the major pathway I had been running around on. I tried to scream but whoever it was put something over my mouth.

"Shhh, it's all right," a familiar voice said. It took a second to register, but I realized who had me wrapped up in his arms. It was Chase, a boy from school that was in a couple of my classes. He was definitely a troublemaker and it had been his locker that I had seen everyone step through to enter this world. Was he the reason I was here? Or was this a dream? I kept telling myself it was the latter, but treated dangers as if they were real. Couldn't be too careful.

"Now, I'm going to let go of your mouth, just promise me you won't scream," he said.

I nodded, feeling a bit better that I had found someone I knew. I had completely forgotten that I had followed them down into the abyss. Everything was so new and surprising, the main reason I had fallen into this world had completely slipped my mind. Chase removed his hand from my mouth but didn't remove the arm that was wrapped around my stomach, holding me against him. I still couldn't see his face as he was behind me. I wondered why he didn't let go and I began to get a little nervous again, although I could feel my cheeks getting warm still.

“What’s going— “

He placed a finger to my mouth. “Wait for them to pass.”

Chase kept us in the shadows of the trees that had grown with the buildings. It was very narrow down the alleyway, almost like some of the passageways in the old Fort Worden naval batteries near Port Townsend, Washington. I couldn’t even see the sky from where I was since the foliage was so thick.

We stayed silent as the men ran past us, not even taking a glance down this way, which made me wonder what was down here that they didn’t think I would go this way. Maybe it was haunted, which would be *awesome*. I had always wanted to see a ghost. It would be a lie to say I had never binge-watched *Ghost Hunters* at sleepovers with Kate. She didn’t see the appeal, but nevertheless she sat next to me for hours during my marathons.

After we were in the clear, Chase let go of me.

“What are you doing here Alice?” He questioned as he leaned against the wall. He had that sly smile that he always seemed to wear at school. He wore a pure black suit, tailed jacket and all, with the black tie loose around his neck. Bizarre, but not surprising compared to everything else. Maybe he was just trying to fit in. Other than his attire, something else seemed off. Then I realized what it was.

“Your eyes.” I stepped closer to him to examine them. They were yellow with black slivers, like some type of contacts I had seen at Kumoricon, the nearest anime convention. “They are like a cat’s! Are you wearing contacts?”

He rolled his eyes, which looked weird with cat’s eyes. “Yes, yes I know, and no I am not. These are what my eyes look like in my true form. Now answer my question.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I went back into the school and I saw you guys. You entered your locker. I got curious so I opened the locker.”

“Curiosity killed the cat, Alice,” Chase sighed.

“But satisfaction brought it back,” I responded. Not many knew the second half of the quote, so I made it my duty to finish it every time I heard someone say it in the typical anticlimactic fashion.

Chase appeared semi-impressed. “Well, well, you have quite a mouth on you for being so quiet at school.”

I gave him a look and then shook my head. “Still wasn’t my fault, I wasn’t going to go inside, I swear! Something pushed me!”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you know who it was?”

“No. I didn’t see who or what it was. Next thing I knew I was here.” I peered around. It was all a lot to take in. I had found myself in a strange new place, one that I had never seen pictures of before or heard anyone talk about. So I asked the obvious question that had been on my mind ever since coming here. “Where are we?”

“Alice, you are in Wonderland,” I heard a voice say behind me.

I turned to find Malcolm standing there along with Davis and Melvin, all of them were also in some of my classes. These were the four boys that I had seen jump in the locker. They each wore some Victorian gear like Chase, but Malcolm’s was a little more extravagant. His was dark green with light green lining and ivy embroidery. He had a burnt orange top hat with deep violet flowers pinned to one side of it covering his raven black hair. His light blue eyes stared at me, making my heart beat a little faster. Kate, my BFF, correctly saw I had the hugest crush on him but I never admitted it out loud because, well, let’s face it—he was completely out of my league.

“You mean the arcade? Is this some new attraction they added in the back?” I asked, referring to the arcade called “Wunderland” off Market street. I looked at Davis and Melvin. They didn’t say a word but just glanced at each other. He must have meant that, maybe they got a new attraction in the back, like laser-tag but more like a virtual reality game. I heard they were making great progress with VR in Utah or Idaho or something. As I kept an eye on Melvin and Davis, I noticed Melvin had bunny ears matching his orange hair. I was just about to point them out when Malcolm shook his head and answered my question.

“No, not the arcade. This is the real deal. This is Wonderland.”

“I don’t understand. You can’t possibly be talking about the children’s tale, can you?”

“Yes.” He peered around, as if making sure no one else was around. “But you shouldn’t be here. It is too dangerous and you aren’t ready.”

“Aren’t ready for... what? “I began when Melvin and Davis grabbed me and Malcolm pressed a vial of liquid to my lips. I tried to struggle, not quite sure what the heck he was trying to give me.

“Drink this, Alice. You must go home now, and forget everything you saw.”

Forcing the drink down my throat, I felt the sweet liquid start to make my body tingle. My vision was getting blurry and I had no idea why the world felt like it was spinning around. How could he do this to me, I wondered. Why couldn't he have just asked?

I shoved him back, but it was too late as the vial was empty. “What the hell did you just give me?”

Before answering, I felt Chase wrap his arms around me and pull me back into the doorway that Malcolm had appeared out of. I let out a slight girly yelp, which I of course immediately regretted.

“Come on Alice, we're going for a ride!” Chase laughed as we started to travel down and down and down.

Great, the falling feeling all over again. It wasn't like my head wasn't already spinning.

CHAPTER 2

When I opened my eyes, I found my friend Kate standing above me. Her long brown hair was braided back, in contrast to my short blonde hair that always seemed messy no matter what I did with it. Kate also always wore jeans and a cute designer top, much nicer than the oil-paint covered jeans and simple t-shirt I usually wore. Just a note, oil-paint doesn't come out of anything. Ever. It even keeps that grease smell to it, which surprisingly I could still make out even after all the paint thinner fumes I had breathed in over the years.

"Alice! Are you all right?" She bent down next to me, her brown eyes wide. I must have really worried her.

I started to sit up and moaned. My head was pounding, as if Thor was inside my skull wielding Mjölnir. "Where am I?"

"You're in the school. I waited for you to come back out to your bike but you never did. I wanted to make sure you got your slippers without getting in trouble, since you didn't go through the main entrance as usual." I believed her, Kate always worried about such things. Wasn't like I really would get into trouble. I was good at talking my way out of any situation with a teacher. "I came inside looking for you and found you passed out in the middle of the hallway."

I tried to remember what happened but only found a dark haze in my memory. *Dark haze; why did that seem familiar?* I couldn't recall anything, only coming back into the school, and then everything else was gone. What happened, I wondered.

"How long was I out?" I asked. So much time seemed like it had passed, as if something had happened, yet it could have only been a minute or two.

"Just a few minutes. I'm glad I found you first, you would have been in big trouble if a teacher found you."

I tried to remember why I came into the school after hours, then it occurred to me. "Oh no, dance class!" I rushed up, which made my head hurt even more. I fumbled and almost fell back down.

Down...

I grabbed my head as it began to pound even louder. I must have hit my head on something, or tripped as I was a bit of a klutz after all, but I didn't feel any bumps on my head.

Kate helped me stay up. "Alice, you can't go to dance, you should go see a nurse. I think you might have a concussion."

I shook my head which made it hurt worse. Stupid thing to do. "No, I'm fine."

"Well at least go home, you shouldn't dance in this condition. I can see if my mom will take you home. We still have the bike rack on the back of our car from our weekend trip."

I thought for a moment. She was right, I really shouldn't dance in this state. I would be falling all over the place and end up with more problems, not to mention making other dancers mad for running into them. "Fine, I will text Becca."

I pulled out my phone and texted my ballet teacher Becca, as both Kate and I snuck out of the school and headed towards her mom's car.

Hey Becca can't make it tonight have bad migraine C u tomorrow.

Kate's mom was waiting for her in the parking lot. She drove a little Mini Cooper Countryman that was a bright blue. I liked to call it 'Smurfie' because, let's be honest, it looked like a big Smurf.

I grabbed my bike and hooked it up to the bike rack on Mrs. B's car. Her full name was Jenny Benjamin, but I always called her Mrs. B. It's always awkward trying to figure out what to call someone's parents. Luckily she told me what to call her when we first met.

Climbing in the car, I smiled to her. "Thanks Mrs. B, I appreciate it."

"No problem, Alice. How's your head feeling?" she asked. Apparently Kate already had told her while I was busy hooking up my bike to her car.

"It's all right. Just need some rest."

"Have any idea what happened?" she asked.

"No, I just went into the school and the next thing I knew, Kate was next to me trying to wake me up. I probably tripped or something, should be fine after some Tylenol."

She turned back and started the car. My iPhone buzzed and I looked down to find Becca had texted me back.

K. Feel better. C u tomorrow.

“So how has school been this year?” Kate’s mom asked as we headed down Lancaster Drive. East Salem High was located at the end of D Street just behind an older strip mall thing. It was small and nothing was ever open. I called it a waste of space, but that was just me. There was a cute dress shop though, and I loved admiring the dresses in the shop window.

“School’s good,” I knew it was the typical evasive teenage answer but my head was killing me.

“What’s your favorite class so far?” Mrs. B always liked to make small talk. I never did mind it but my head was killing me and I would rather just rest though I would never tell her that.

“Probably Japanese.”

“I can’t believe that you and Kate are taking Japanese. I know I would never be able to take it. It seems so hard,” Mrs. B went on yet again. This was the sixth time she said it was hard, can’t believe it, etc.

I wasn’t going to lie, it was totally because of anime and manga that I decided to take Japanese. I grew up watching *Sailor Moon*, *Trigun*, *Fruits Basket*, along with all the Miyazaki films of course. I couldn’t get enough of the art. I loved art, as I myself wanted to be an artist. I spent most of my nights in my room either drawing or painting whatever came to mind. I enjoyed all kinds and types of art as well, not just manga. I was most fond of oils and watercolors, complete opposites in reality, as one took a lot of time and could be fixed quite easily, while the other was quicker, more delicate, and was easier to make a mistake. They took different strengths and I liked practicing with both in order to work on my weaknesses.

What I really loved about painting was that I was able to create a world that was only in my mind. Anything I could come up with, I tried my hardest to represent it on the canvas or paper. The only limit I had was in my imagination. It was the greatest feeling in the entire world.

“But you must also enjoy art class as well, Kate says you are really good,” Mrs. B commented. She must have noticed I was off in my own little world. Again.

“Yeah, I do. Right now we are doing portraits in art so that’s fun. I haven’t really done much with portraits.”

“You really like art don’t you?”

“I do. I love being able to make anything I want. It’s like being in a different world in which I can let my mind wander. There’s nothing else like

it.”

“You think you will do it professionally? Go to art school and all that?”

I sighed. I didn’t want to think about it really. It was my dream, yes, but others haven’t been that supportive of me. My parents thought art school was a waste of time and money and that I should pick a better career like business or engineering. They said there is no money in art and that it wasn’t real work, and many of their friends agreed. It didn’t help that I had a sister that was starting medical school, another sister that was a senior going to major in physics, and that both of my parents were CPAs, Certified Public Accountants. None of my family understood anything about art, they only cared about what they called ‘the real world’, and nothing about the world of imagination.

“We will see, I guess,” I finally answered. I looked over to find Kate staring at me. “What?”

“You know you can do whatever you want,” she whispered quietly so her mother wouldn’t hear. “You don’t have to listen to your parents.”

Good ol’ Kate had been at my side every time my parents threatened to take away my paint or ballet shoes when I did badly in a class. If I got anything less than a ‘B’, I was doomed. If I ever had problems with homework, she was there helping me. I was thankful for such a great friend. “I have a while, I just don’t want to worry about it.”

“Okay.” After that serious question, she smacked my arm. “I saw you looking at Malcolm in English. You really like him don’t you?”

Not this again, I swore she made it her job to bug me every chance she could. I smacked her back. “I told you to knock it off. He would never go out with someone like me.”

Kate gave me that face, like I was despicable for thinking he wouldn’t like me. “Why not? You are awesome and creative, he would be lucky to have you.”

I sighed. “Because, there’s a bunch of girls lined up all the time trying to get him to take them out, and they always get rejected. I don’t want to be one of those girls.”

“But if you did get him, think of how crazy you would make them all. It would be awesome!”

“Just forget it, it will never happen.”

“Never say never.” She smirked, as if she knew something I didn’t.

I rolled my eyes. That would be the day, me with one of the most popular boys at school. That would just turn me into the most hated girl in school. Though Kate still would be my friend, which she really was my only real friend at school anyway, so it wouldn't be much different. Maybe I should try, it wouldn't hurt anything other than my ego.

No, I would never have the guts.

After a while, we made it to my house off Highway 22. Mrs. B dropped me off and I pulled my bike off the back of her car. I waved goodbye to them, after they made sure I had my keys this time, and unlocked the front door.

No one was home as my parents were still at work and my sister was at racquetball practice. For some reason Oregon was big into racquetball. It was fun but nothing I would compete in. The ball moved so fast sometimes and I would just get stuck on the wall, not moving my feet, as my sister's coach said when I did try outs. He was pretty scary.

I set my things on the dining room table and grabbed the phone to call my mom. Usually I biked to her office after dance practice so I needed to let her know I didn't feel well and that I got a ride home. I also knew I should call right now before I forgot, which has maybe happened once or twice. After ringing a few times, she picked up.

"Amanda Moselle speaking," my mother answered her phone. She must have not looked at the caller ID again.

"Hi Mom, it's me. I wasn't feeling well so Mrs. B took me home."

"What's wrong, Meredith?" I hated it when my family used that name. It was my legal first name, but I never came to like it. It felt too stuffy for me, so I always went by my middle name and made sure teachers knew that before they did role call in class.

"Just have a bad migraine. Decided not to go to dance," I explained. It wasn't like she really cared about me skipping class as she didn't see the point of ballet other than for exercise. It was so much more than that though.

"All right, thanks for calling. See you later tonight."

I heard her phone click off and I hung up the phone. I sighed and grabbed my backpack. I needed to relax and the only way to do that was to paint.

I grabbed my stuff and went to my room. As I stepped inside, I could feel my worries just wash away. Splashes of color filled my room as most of my paintings covered all the walls, and even more canvases were stacked inside the closet. People always wondered why I didn't have that many changes of clothes, and if they ever came into my room, they would understand why. I simply didn't have room and I spent my allowance on other things, like paint. If it wasn't art related, then it was comics, manga, and books that littered the shelves and floor.

As I took in all the bright colors I painted with, as I always liked to capture the boldest of subjects, I caught sight of a painting I did from a year ago. Bright greens and blues were used, with red flowers.

I stared at it, as if recalling something, or some place. Why did the smell of fresh-cut grass just come to me? I pondered. It was like a memory that had been repressed.

I shook my head. It must have just been an idea I had for a project. Maybe that was what I should work on next, creating a world made of grass and plants.

Pulling out some old brushes, I got busy. Homework could wait until after dinner.

CHAPTER 3

I slammed my locker shut as the first bell rang. I had five minutes to get to class, plenty of time to get there and be able to chat a little with Kate. We both had first period English. What a great way to start the day, with English. Though, in reality, was there any class that would be good in the morning? I didn't think so.

Heading towards class, I hurried through the crowd of students who were all trying to get to class before the tardy bell went off. I had learned to get through crowds pretty well, it was almost like a dance: jump over the bags that were left on the floor, step to the side as two friends who acted like they hadn't seen each other in forever even though it had only been a day ran to each other and hugged, duck as the arm of a basketball player punched one of his friends in the shoulder. With some of things I had to avoid, I swore it was like I was invisible.

Finally reaching English class, I found the room to be the same as usual: posters of classic novels littered part of the walls, a newly installed whiteboard in the front, and the professor's desk near the old chalkboard that was covered in the reading lists for each class that Mr. Barnes taught. I wasn't looking forward to the next year when we have to read an even longer list of books, of which none were sci-fi or fantasy I might add. I didn't care what he said, Isaac Asimov and J.R.R. Tolkien were classics.

Kate was sitting in the back as she always did. I grabbed a seat next to her and placed my books on the desk. Right now we were reading *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. It wasn't my first choice, but it wasn't too bad.

"How are you feeling today?" Kate asked. I didn't get around to texting her back last night as I had become so engrossed in my painting. I also ended up not going to bed until three in the morning due to putting off homework until midnight and was beyond tired. Good thing my parents didn't notice my light still on so late at night.

"Great, other than really tired. I got in one of my hypnotic states while painting last night and forgot about everything else again. Before I realized it, it was midnight and I hadn't done any homework. Got done around three.

My Global Studies homework probably makes no sense whatsoever. I don't even remember what I wrote."

She laughed. "I will take a look at it during lunch. What did you end up painting?"

Just as the bell rang, I watched as Chase and Davis hurried into the room. It was strange, for some reason I could picture them in Victorian costumes. Must have been because we were reading *Great Expectations* and I had a vivid imagination, at least that was what my father said. I couldn't help it if I had imaginary friends growing up, it was normal. I think.

Chase and Davis took the two seats in front of us, which was strange since usually they sat across the classroom. I turned back to Kate and our conversation. "I ended up painting some buildings with flowers all over them. I had a vivid image of it in my mind when I got home."

Davis dropped his books onto the floor. Good thing Mr. Barnes was late as he would have scolded him for being so disrespectful with someone else's property as all our books were owned by the school. Chase smacked him in the arm. "Watch it, clumsy."

Davis didn't say anything but retrieved his books from the floor. I turned back to Kate. "So, that's what I painted."

"That's cool that you can see something clearly in your mind. You're lucky to be so talented."

"I don't know, I love art but my parents won't ever understand it. They don't see it as a career, just a hobby."

Kate put her hand on my back and made one of her 'I'll always be at your side' smiles, which always made my chest feel a little warmer. "It's your life, Alice, do what you want with it."

"Thanks Kate." I knew she was a great friend, that I probably wouldn't find another person like her. Through thick and thin she had been by my side. I just hoped one day I could do the same for her.

English class was dull, we went over *Great Expectations* some more, apparently there was more written between the lines that we freshmen couldn't comprehend, at least that is what Mr. Barnes kept saying. He just wished kids these days could appreciate such great literature, or at least that is how he put it. I felt like arguing with him every time he said that, but I knew it would be a waste of breath. I also didn't want him to get mad at me

and make my grades suffer. Then I would have to deal with my parents thinking I was failing a class all over again.

As class finished and I started to pack up for the next class, I saw a young boy in the doorway to the hallway. He had the whitest blonde hair I had ever seen, pure as snow, but couldn't have been more than ten years old. He stared at me with his grey eyes.

Everything seemed to stay still as the boy looked at me. I just froze, not being able to do anything but watch him. I felt like I was looking at someone that couldn't exist, like a ghost, but I didn't know why.

"Alice, are you okay?" Kate asked.

I blinked and the kid was gone. I nodded towards the doorway. "Did you see him?"

"See who?"

"That little boy," I shook my head. It had to have been my imagination, I hadn't gotten much sleep. "Never mind, let's get to class."

Math class was next, which, again, didn't make mornings any more fun. Luckily my locker was near the class so I didn't have to hurry. As I switched out textbooks, I heard Davis' voice from a few lockers down.

"She remembers you guys, we need to do something," his squeaky voice was barely audible over the typical hallway noise.

"That isn't possible, I suppressed those memories myself," Malcolm answered. I glanced over towards them, wondering what they could be talking about. All of their backs faced me.

"Davis isn't lying," Chase added. "I heard her say she could remember buildings covered in plants."

I dropped my math book. They were talking about me. I quickly retrieved it and hurried away, hoping they didn't suspect that I had heard them. I didn't understand why my art concerned them so. I got random images to paint all the time in my mind, why would the buildings with plants on them matter? Why would they care, what did they think I was remembering, and why wasn't I supposed to remember it?

Math went by as slowly as possible, which was really normal. Malcolm was in class, sitting a few rows in front of me. He didn't seem to pay much attention to me and I began to wonder if they had truly been talking about me. It was highly unlikely as they didn't seem to notice I existed in the month that I had known them. They haven't even spoken two words to me

this entire time, so why would they care so much if I painted a building with flowers on it?

Next was Global Studies, which was fun, with Mr. Lewis, who always was passionate about whatever he was teaching. Today's lecture was on the Roman conquest. The Empire was a bit crazy, I had to admit, especially the Emperors, but they were often victorious.

Lunch finally came at last. I hurried to the cafeteria with my bento, a Japanese style lunch box that I loved putting together cute meals in, and found a spot to wait for Kate at. I never saw the little boy from earlier that morning again. It was strange, he must have been someone's nephew or something.

I pulled out my chopsticks and opened my bento.

Now, one of my quirky hobbies was making artistic bentos. And why not? I loved art and after going through half a school day, I wanted something at lunch that would cheer me up. Today's theme was pirates. The rice on the bottom portion had seaweed sprawled across it like a treasure map. My two boiled eggs were decorated like a skull. Then I just had some fruit and veggies. I was in a hurry this morning otherwise I would have thought something up to design them like. I honestly could have slept in a lot more if I didn't do this, but I had been looking forward to working with this theme.

"Whoa, nice bento."

I whipped my head around to find Chase looking over my shoulder.

He smiled as he sat down next to me. "Mind if I join you?"

Since he had already sat beside me, I knew he wasn't going to take no for an answer. And honestly, why would I say no? He was a nice guy from what I could tell. A joker, sure, but he always meant well. "Sure, why not?"

"Thanks." He pulled out a sandwich. By the smell of it, it had to have been tuna.

I tried to hide the disgusted look I wanted to make. Although I loved Japanese culture, I despised fish. I couldn't help it, I just hated the smell and taste.

"That's all you're going to eat?" I asked, as that was the only thing in the sack he brought.

"All I want so why not?" He took a big bite and smiled. "Nothing beats a tuna sandwich."

“Uh, I can think of some things,” I commented as I took a bite of one of my boiled eggs. It was strange talking to him. School had been going for a month now and I rarely talked to anyone in their group. They seemed to keep their distance from everyone, other than all the girls who chased Malcolm around. They looked as if they were searching for something, but what that was I had no idea.

“So,” he started. “I heard you talking about having a vivid image of some buildings...”

My eyes flickered towards him. He was staring at me as I took another bite of my egg. “And I heard you talking to your friends about that. Why is it important? Why do you care?”

He raised an eyebrow and grinned widely. “You were eavesdropping?”

“Weren’t you?” I countered.

“Touché.” He took another bite of his sandwich. “I was just wondering where you got an idea like that. Buildings of flowers and streets of grass.”

I started to reply when it occurred to me I never said anything about streets of grass to Kate. All I told her were about the buildings. There was no way he could know that. “How did you know there were streets of grass?”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“I told Kate that the buildings had flowers on them, not about the grass streets.” I watched for his reaction. He just stared at me, looking as if he wanted to punch himself for saying something he shouldn’t have. So there was something going on that he wasn’t telling me, and it had been me that they were talking about all this time.

Now, the better question was why.

“How would you know that Chase?” I asked.

He stayed silent, probably realizing he had said too much and didn’t want to dig himself in a bigger hole than he already was in. Too late, though, because now I wanted answers.

“Answer me Chase.” I sounded more demanding than I should have, but I really just wanted to know the truth. Something wasn’t adding up and after passing out yesterday I felt like everything was in a haze, as if my world was spinning around off its axis.

“Is he bothering you? I can make him stop if you wish.”

I looked up to find Malcolm standing across from me, his lunch bag a little neater than Chase's crumpled up bag. I wondered if he also had a tuna sandwich for lunch, which I doubted because no one in their right mind would bring that to school for lunch.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Chase asked, a little snarky, as if he thought Malcolm had really threatened him.

"Well?" He inquired once more. I had totally forgotten about the question he had asked of me.

I shook my head. "No, he's not." But that didn't mean I wasn't mad about Chase not answering my questions, but let's be honest, I couldn't bring myself to start interrogating Malcolm as well. I was too shy and I could already feel my cheeks start to redden.

"Good, I would hate to think he was doing otherwise." Malcolm gave Chase a look. Chase stuck his tongue out at him. I laughed. With all the things that had happened, I had almost forgot about this morning. Maybe one of them knew about that strange kid.

"Hey, random question," I began. "You guys wouldn't happen to know anything about a young boy with white hair would you? I saw a kid running around earlier and was curious why he was here."

Chase and Malcolm glanced at each other. They knew something, I was sure of it.

"No," Malcolm finally answered. "I wouldn't."

"Probably one of the teacher's kids or something," Chase added.

I nodded, even I knew that it was a lie. "That's what I thought."

Malcolm stood there for a moment longer, then nodded to Chase. "Hey, Chase, remember that meeting we had with Mr. Williams?"

"Yeah. We should get to that. Great talking to you, Alice." Chase stood up quickly and followed Malcolm out, taking his disgusting sandwich with him.

I watched as they left in a hurry, frowning. Mr. Williams was absent today.

CHAPTER 4

“Very good.” Becca stopped the recording of the song “Mad World” by Michael Andrews. It was going to be one of the songs included in the ballet Becca constructed around the theme of dreams. She was awesome like that, and with this being her first ballet which she created from scratch, I was extremely excited about it.

“We will go through this one more time and then you three can practice your hip-hop routine for the pre-ballet performance.” She nodded to Val, Rei, and I.

I smiled. Three of us got to perform a hip-hop routine to “See you in my Nightmares” by Kanye West. It was a fun choreography that we all put together one afternoon, well it took a few to really clean it up. I would have to jump on Val’s back as part of it, so we would need a lot of practice so I didn’t fall off or hurt her, or nearly pull her pants down again...

As I got ready to do our ballet routine, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye at the doors that were left open letting in some fresh fall air. It was the boy from earlier, standing across the street, staring at me again. A car passed by in front of him and he vanished.

I blinked a couple of times, not sure what exactly I saw. No one else seemed to have seen the boy as they were still gathering together to start the song.

“Are you ready, Alice?” Val asked. I must have seemed really out of it.

I turned to her and smiled. “Yeah, let’s do this!”

The music started playing.

“...And I find it kind of funny, I find it kind of sad. The dreams in which I’m dying are the best I’ve ever had.”

Once the song was done, the three of us changed into sneakers and got ready for our hip hop routine. I was glad I remembered my NIKE’s, it always looked weird doing hip hop in ballet slippers. The three of us got in our positions and waited for the music to start.

“... We were once a fairy tale, but this is farewell...”



Class came to an end and I gathered my things. I was going to ride my bike over to my parent's work off Summer Street, which was only a few blocks away and the ride wasn't terrible at this time of year. Once November came around I would either have to wait for them to pick me up or find a ride over. There was no way I was going to bike in that kind of rain or cold.

It only took a few minutes to get there, as it was just down the street. I stopped in front of the small old building, hooked my bike to my parents' BMW coup and entered. There were a few people waiting, as those who filed for extensions needed to file by the fifteenth. And my parents thought I didn't pay attention to the 'real world'. Then it would get calm until the New Year came around, things would get even more hectic until April.

I took a seat in the lobby and waited for my parents. Pulling out one of the mangas I put in my backpack this morning, I started to read *Oresama Teacher*. Though it wasn't sci-fi or fantasy, I found it to be quite entertaining. I personally would love to have Mr. Saeki as my sensei, but nevertheless, it was fiction.

After about half an hour of reading my manga, my parents were ready to go home. I climbed in the car, starving and excited to have leftover Chinese from Golden Crown that my parents had picked up the night before.

"How was your day, Meredith?" Mom asked as she got into the car. Again, they never called me Alice. It was like that part of me was part of a fantasy I was living in, as if 'Alice' was the artist in me and if they ignored it then it would simply go away.

I buckled my seat. "Fine."

Dad started the car and backed up from the parking spot. "Dance too?"

"Yup." It was a simple answer, I knew, but if I went into detail they would never understand. They didn't think it was an accomplishment when I could perfect a brisé in point. Or the fact I could dance in point.

It was all meaningless fun to them.

"What are you doing this weekend? Are you going to go to Kate's house?" Mom asked.

I thought about it. I didn't have much homework so going to Kate's would be a good plan. Then I could talk to her about Chase and Malcolm, maybe. But then again, she would think it was just because I liked Malcolm

when really that wasn't the case. *This time*. "Probably, I need to call her. I'll do that when I get home."

When we got home I called Kate and her mother said I could come over the next day for a sleepover. We decided we would meet at the downtown mall and hangout for a while, because that was really the only thing to do in Salem. There were also some fun antique stores downtown too that we had fun exploring, especially Engelberg Antiks. Last time we were there we found what looked like a secret society code book. It was pretty exciting and I still needed to do some research on what exactly it was.

Once I hung up the phone, dinner was ready, or at least the leftovers had been reheated. My sister Lilith was home from racquetball practice as well. She had her own car, a little green Volkswagen Bug, and could drive herself. Once she put away her stuff, we all gathered at the dining table.

"So," Mom began as the clatter of utensils hit the plates, except for me since I was the only one who knew how to use chopsticks. "How was your day Lilith?"

Lilith ran her hands through her long, light brown hair, twisting it back into a pony tail. "It was great, physics was fun, chemistry was great. Eugene is such a great teacher and thinks I can study physics on a scholarship for sure."

Eugene was an interesting teacher at our school. He got away with practically breaking every school code in his lab: allowing food during class, playing music, wearing Crocs... Those Crocs, I swore.

"That would be perfect. Then you can save up your college funds for a house." Mom smiled.

"And I also beat one of the head boys at racquetball today," she added.

"That's great; teach those boys how to play." Dad smiled.

"Coach says I should be able to get top ten in the girl's division for state this year. I'm hoping she is right."

"That would be fantastic, Dear, we are so proud of you," Mom said. I tried not to cough. They were always proud of her. Her and Edith, our older sister who was in medical school at OHSU in Portland. She came home every once in a while when she had time, mainly to have Mom do her laundry for her.

"Meredith, how did you do on that math test you had earlier this week?" Dad asked.

Crap, they remembered. They always remembered. I poked one of the pot-stickers with my chopsticks. "I did okay."

"So an 'A'?"

"More like a 'B' minus," I mumbled.

"A 'B' minus?"

Before he could lecture me, I held out my hand. "It's fine, the final will replace the lowest grade. I will study harder next time. I already talked to the teacher and he said I shouldn't have any problem getting an 'A' after the semester ends."

My sister leaned over and whispered in my ear. "It's because you spend so much time at dance and painting. If you gave up those useless hobbies of yours, you could spend more time studying."

"At least I have a creative mind," I snapped back. I really shouldn't have said that because I knew it would just encourage her more, but I couldn't help myself. I hated it when she treated my things as hobbies instead of being my passion and what I wanted to do with my life.

She moved back to her spot and rolled her eyes. "If what you do is considered creative. I've seen your work; it's crap."

I slammed my chopsticks down. "Take that back."

"Why? It's the truth."

"Girls, stop arguing," Dad finally interfered. We stopped and went back to eating. I hated my sister. We always got into fights like this and it was always her judging me and making me feel like crap. She acted like she knew the future and what was good for me. Apparently she knew more about me than I did.

"But she is right," Dad went on. "You should focus on your school work more instead of your little hobbies."

I wanted to scream. Not this again, it was all I needed on top of everything else that was going on at school. I wished for once they could just believe in me. "But that's what I want to do, I want to become an artist."

"Someday, dear, you will learn that there are better careers out there. Then you will thank us for making you study more."

Like that was going to happen. I finished eating my food in silence, not wanting to draw this fight out again, as it was a reoccurrence in our house, and finally excused myself to my room. I slammed my door closed behind

me and wished I could lock it to keep my sister out. I knew she would poke her head in here after a few minutes. She always liked making matters worse.

Just as I predicted, my sister came into the room merely seconds later.

“What do you want?” I asked as I lay on my bed and started reading the next volume of *Oresama Teacher*. I wanted to know more why Mr. Saeki was so keen on adding students to the school. I always found manga to be a great escape from reality, as I could fall into the world and forget everything my family said to me.

Lilith didn’t come any further into the room than the doorway. “I wasn’t joking, you really should focus on better things. Everyone in our family is successful. It would be a shame if you weren’t.”

I rolled my eyes. “Being successful isn’t everything.”

“Sure, keep telling yourself that. Just keep in mind what they said, you will thank them later.”

“I’ll try.”

“Hmm, we will see about that. I was going to say that you should try to fit in, but that is impossible, I mean how many friends do you even have at school? Just Kate. You know she only hangs out with you because she pities you. Alice, you need to just grow up and act like a normal person.”

“Shut up!”

She hurried out the door before the pillow I threw hit her.

CHAPTER 5

I woke up to the wind swirling around my room, papers being picked up like dry leaves. I moaned as I got up out of bed to shut the window. I swore I had closed it already. I took a glance at the clock. It was 3 A.M. *Seriously?* I needed more sleep in order to function properly. At least I could sleep in the next day, and I was just going to hang out with Kate all day. I couldn't wait, maybe that was why I woke up so easily.

I shut the window and went back to bed. I put my head down on the pillow and snuggled with my T.A.R.D.I.S. blanket. It was so soft, I loved the feel of it against my skin. *I wish I could run away from all my problems with the Doctor (9th Doctor to be exact, but I wasn't picky). Not that it would solve any of my problems, but it would be fun.*

"Alice." A whisper came across the room. "Come Alice."

I jerked my head up and peered around the room. Nothing moved and there was nowhere anyone could hide in my room, believe me.

"Allllllllice," the sweet voice called.

That time I knew I wasn't imagining it. It sounded like a child's voice. *Could it have been the kid I had seen earlier that day?* I blinked a few times, trying to concentrate but I couldn't. Once I heard the voice clearly this time, my mind went into a daze and I couldn't think clearly. All my mind and body wanted to do was follow the voice. I had to go to the kid, to know what he wanted.

I stepped out of my bed, half aware of what I was doing, half not. It was stupid to follow a voice coming from something you really didn't know quite what it was, especially when it was sweet and eerie. That much I knew from every horror movie ever made. I swore the creepiest stories had kids in it as well. Even with these thoughts going through my head, I couldn't stop. No matter the things I screamed inside of my head, my body wouldn't comply.

Going straight back to the window I had just closed, I slid it open again and climbed outside. Luckily my window went into the front yard and was easy to climb out of. I was afraid of what I might have done if that weren't

the case, such as climbing down a drain pipe or something like in the movies.

No one in the house noticed as I snuck off into the night; in my pajamas no less. I wished whatever this voice was would have ordered me to change into clothes. I mean, what if someone saw me? But then again I was a zombie, not able to control my body at all. I felt helpless, it was the worse feeling in the world. At least I wore socks to bed. It got chilly at night in Oregon.

The autumn leaves crunched under my feet as I left the driveway. The gravel underneath hurt but the socks kept my feet from getting cut. I should have stopped but I couldn't. I was under the spell of the person calling me.

"Alice," the voice echoed through the night.

I kept moving down the gravel road, my feet screaming at me in agony. I would definitely be suffering in ballet the next week. At least my feet were tough after all the practice I had in class, but that didn't make the pain go away.

The gravel road was a dead end, I knew that before this zombie-like adventure. I used to sneak out into this forest when I was younger, against my parents' wishes, just so I could get away from the world and dream. I used to think that if I ventured out here long enough, I would find fairies or a castle, or some fantastical creature that I could share an adventure with. But that never happened and I eventually stopped sneaking out here; for that reason and the fact that Mr. Petrovitsky found me one day and chewed me out for trespassing. He was a very small man but I swore he must have worked for the KGB before immigrating here twenty years ago. If he found me tonight, I had no idea what he would do. Probably shoot me, actually.

I stepped into the forest. It was exactly how I remembered it, other than being dark out. Luckily the moon was out, providing a soft glow, but that didn't mean I could clearly see everything around me. I could make out trees and ferns, but that was about it. I just hoped that there were no wild predators out at this time of the night, as I had heard coyotes howling the other night. God I wished I could stop.

"Alice..."

Oh right, the voice is what brought me out here. I hoped I could figure out who was calling me. Yes, I figured it was the boy, but that didn't mean I knew exactly who he was. And I wanted to know why he was able to

control my body like this, leaving me in such a daze that I couldn't make myself stop.

I went deeper and deeper into the forest, and I felt as if I wanted to cry. *Where was the voice leading me? I just wanted to go home, was that too much to ask?* No matter how hard I screamed in my mind, no matter how much thought I put into it, I couldn't stop my body. All I could think was *why me?*

This had to be a dream, right? I mean, this didn't happen to people, being taken over like this. I really just hoped that I eventually would wake up and find myself back in my bed, all of it being one big nightmare. But the pain I felt, everything here, it just felt so real. I doubted it was a dream, but at the same time, all this just couldn't be real.

The forest was calm at this time of night. I didn't see any animals and the slight breeze brought a rustle through the branches. The blueish light coming from the moon made it seem almost magical. If it weren't so stressful not being able to control my body because of some voice, it would be quite serene.

Then I could see him, the small white-haired boy who had been following me around town. It had been him, I was right.

"It's you," I said. I blinked, I was finally able to control my body. I stopped walking towards him and looked down at my hands. Yes, I finally had control. "How did you do that? How did you make me come out here?"

"It was quite easy, Alice, as you have a very impressionable heart. All I had to do was call it and you came." The boy stepped closer. He spoke like a gentleman, one way beyond his years. It was quite strange, actually, as I never knew a kid that would speak like that. His eyes met mine, grey as the moon was that night. I couldn't look away. They were almost hypnotic.

"Why? Why me? I don't understand," I said.

"I can't have you undoing what my master has been planning all this time. You must be disposed of." He pulled out a gold revolver. I had never seen one like it before and if I weren't on the wrong side of it, I would have been quite fascinated by it. On the side of it was a large clock, like an old pocket watch. "Goodbye Alice."

My eyes widened and I tried to move my feet but I was rooted in place. I had no idea if it was because of the boy or if I was just frozen in shock.

Why would such a small boy want to kill me? It made no sense, and who was this master of his? And what plan would I be undoing?

As he began to pull the trigger, tears formed in my eyes. *Could this really be the end for me, when my life hadn't even started?* I never got to say goodbye to my friends; they would never know what happened to me. I would just be gone. And not even I would know the truth to why.

Just as I thought all hope was lost, a figure jumped out of the trees and on top of the boy. The boy tried to punch away whatever had attacked him, but it was no use. Whoever it was threw the gun away and stood up, his leg pinning the kid down. As he stood up, the moonlight lit up his face. It was Chase.

"Chase, what's going on?" I exclaimed. I hurried to him, able to move once again. It was the worst feeling, not being able to move one's own body.

Chase grabbed my wrist. "No time to explain, we gotta get out of here."

He started running, dragging me behind him. I wanted to stop and ask more questions, but by the sounds of it, the boy was back up and had grabbed the gun. I could hear the revolver being shot at us over and over again.

"Don't worry," Chase yelled back at me. "He's a horrible shot and I can hear where he is going to shoot next. We will be fine."

I didn't understand how he could "hear" where he was going to shoot next, but I didn't bother to ask for an explanation. Knowing Chase, he wouldn't answer anything just for laughs. For some reason it felt like déjà vu with him saving me, but I had no idea why. It must have been because of some strange dream a while back.

We delved deeper into the forest. I had never been this deep in the woods before and nothing seemed familiar. Everything seemed darker and more eerie, as if it was possible some witch would appear and try to get us to eat her gingerbread house. Just as I thought about that, we came upon a small shed or maybe even a house. My heart began to race faster and I knew I would scream if some old lady appeared. Chase ran straight at it. He wasn't even slowing down as we headed towards the closed door.

"Chase, you better slow down!" I tried to pull him back but he didn't waver. I almost tripped but caught myself and kept running even though I didn't want to. I really had no choice.

He laughed. “Nah, this will be fun Alice! Just hold on to me!”

I screamed as he quickly turned around and wrapped his arms around me, still laughing as if he thought this was all fun and games. As he grabbed me, he leaped forward towards the closed entrance.

And through the door we went. Falling down and down and down.

CHAPTER 6

This feeling, it felt so familiar. A black pit of nothing surrounded me and colors swirled around like paint going down the drain. We kept falling and falling and I wanted to puke but I restrained myself. I felt as if this had happened before, perhaps even recently. I didn't know what was going on and my head felt like it was spinning even more than the colors around me.

When it all finally stopped, I found myself laying in darkness on top of Chase, as his hands were still wrapped around me. I didn't know what to do; it was awkward lying on him, my face towards his. I could feel his hot breath against my mouth. This was the closest I had ever been to a boy and although I didn't really have feelings for him, I still could feel my heart begin to race.

He let out a brief chuckle. "Are you gonna stay on top of me all day or are you going to move? I mean, I'm not complaining but we do have some things to get done here."

I quickly got up off of him, embarrassed I didn't do so earlier. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Just teasing you Alice, a lot has happened, I don't blame you for wanting to stay in my arms."

If it wasn't so dark, he would have been able to see the look of me wanting to punch him for saying that and because of how red I was getting. That was not why I didn't get off of him, it was because of the shock of the sudden landing. I knew he was probably joking but it didn't mean I still didn't want to punch him. I glanced around, the smell of grass filling my nostrils. Grass, that seemed familiar—and not the 'I'm from Oregon, everything smells like grass' familiar.

"Where are we?" I asked. Chase didn't answer but got up and headed towards the other side of whatever room we were in. "Chase?"

He slowly opened a door. The light hurt my eyes at first but then they adjusted and I couldn't believe what I saw.

Buildings covered in flowers surrounded us. Just like in my painting, just like the vision I had in my mind the other day. Speaking of my mind, my head began to hurt. Pain shot through it like a bolt of lightning.

“Ow, my head.”

Chase put his hands on my shoulders. “Hold on Alice, everything will be all right. We just have to hurry, okay? Can you trust me enough to do what I ask? I promise everything will be explained soon, I just have to get you to the person who can help.”

I held my head and tried to nod but the pain was almost overwhelming. I bent down. I had been in a lot of pain before with migraines, but this was beyond overwhelming. I felt like someone was trying to split my head open.

“Hang on, Alice. It will just be for a little longer. You can get past this, I believe in you.” He picked me up in his arms. On a normal day I would question this, probably slap him, but there was no way I could walk. I had to let him carry me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck to keep myself steady and leaned my head against his chest. He didn’t say a word but started towards whatever our destination was. I wanted to ask more questions but it was nearly impossible. My head ached to the point where I could hardly think straight.

Chase took me outside and the bright sun made my eyes and head hurt even worse. The buildings around me looked like the ones I painted just the day before. It all seemed so familiar, even the roads were made of grass just like I had envisioned. The air smelled so sweet, almost like a field of roses.

As for the people, something about them seemed off—other than the fact they were wearing Victorian clothing, though after going to a few conventions, different style clothing never hit me as being peculiar. But as I looked at them, I found that I couldn’t see their faces. Some type of shadow covered them like a veil during a funeral. It was quite odd since there was no fabric but only darkness.

Yet it seemed like I had seen it before.

Chase started running through the crowd, no one paying much attention. He definitely had a good hold on me as I didn’t feel like I was going to fall at all. He really should try out for ballet at Tippy Toe, he was strong and from what I could tell, he had pretty good balance. I told myself to remember to mention that later.

I glanced up at him when I noticed something odd. He had purple hair, like deep purple. I almost didn’t notice because of how dark it was. I squinted at the top of his head.

“Chase, why are you wearing cat ears?” I asked. “And your hair is dark purple. When did you change your hair? Are you going to some con?”

“Don’t worry about it Alice. Not important right now.”

I closed my eyes and placed my head on his shoulder. I felt him laugh a little.

He kept carrying me through the grassy streets. I had no idea how long this was going to last but I knew that soon I needed something that would make the pain go away. I wanted to pass out so bad, but I had to know what was going on.

Chase stopped moving and I opened my eyes to find us in some strange alley. It was rather small, more like a passageway. It was dark in this area, giant trees towering before us against the buildings. We were stopped in front of an old wooden door, rather different than the glass building we had passed before. Chase knocked it with his foot.

The door opened to reveal someone I actually knew. Davis. He wore a brown suit. It looked good on him, very distinguishing.

“Davis, what are you doing here?” I questioned, half dazed.

“What am I doing here?” He pointed at me. “What is *she* doing here Chase? This is against the rules!”

Chase shoved past him into the building. “I don’t follow the rules, that’s why I exist. Besides, she needed to be brought here.”

“What are you talking about?” Davis squeaked, following Chase around the room.

“I’ll explain in a moment.” Chase set me down on a couch. I glanced around. The place was quaint, just a living room that had only a few pieces of old leather furniture. There were other doors, but I had no idea what they lead to, I presumed maybe bathroom, kitchen, and bedrooms but after everything that had happened, normal didn’t seem to exist anymore.

Chase turned to Davis. “Where’s Malcolm?”

“I’m here.” I watched as Malcolm came out of one of the doorways with Melvin. Their eyes widened as they saw me.

Melvin quickly grabbed Chase by the collar. “What have you done?”

“I had to bring her here. My suspicion was correct, the White Rabbit had found her. He almost killed her,” Chase explained as Melvin tightened his grip. He didn’t struggle though, but let Melvin get whatever frustration he had out.

“You can’t just stalk a girl; you have any idea how perverted that makes you?” Melvin went on. I thought about agreeing, as he did have a point, but Chase did save my life because of it. I really couldn’t complain.

“If I didn’t follow her, she would be dead!” Chase replied.

Malcolm ignored the two of them and knelt down beside me. He pulled out a small cookie and handed it to me. Something about all this seemed familiar. “Alice, you have to eat this. Fast.”

I grabbed it and without thinking it about it, drank it down in one gulp. I realized after the fact that eating some strange cookie that a boy handed me wasn’t the smartest thing to do. True, I knew him from school, but I didn’t know that much about him. My head was hurting so bad already that for some reason I thought it could help.

And I was right.

Memories came rushing back to me, memories that I didn’t know were gone. The locker. This place. Guards chasing after me and Chase and the rest of them coming to my rescue, Malcolm forcing me to drink some potion, just like they did now.

So I had been here before, that is why everything seemed so familiar. But there were still so many questions that were still left unanswered and now that my headache had subsided, I could finally get these guys to talk.

“Who are you all really? What am I doing here? Who just tried to kill me? What is this place?” Questions spilled out of my mouth.

Malcolm grabbed my hand. “Listen to me, this isn’t what was supposed to happen.”

I stared at him. He was wearing that dark green suit as I remembered him wearing the day before. His curly dark hair stuck out from underneath his burnt orange hat. He looked so handsome that I felt as if I was going to melt when he touched my hand. But I couldn’t, I had to figure out what was going on.

I pulled my hand out of his, letting him know he couldn’t smooth talk his way out of answering me. “What was supposed to happen? I don’t understand.”

“You were supposed to be told of this war before coming here. We weren’t going to force you into this but somehow they found out about you. We had to act quickly.”

Chase butted in. “You mean *I* had to act quickly?”

Malcolm gave him a look and turned back to me. "Either way, here you are."

"Here I am? Where the hell am I? What is this place? Why are you all wearing weird clothes? And what do you mean telling me of a war? What war?"

He smiled. "So many questions, so curious. But let's start off with your first one. Alice, this is Wonderland. You are in Wonderland."

I wrinkled my nose, thinking that he was just making fun of me. I glanced over at the others but they didn't seem to be laughing. "You mean... like in the kids book?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"But that is just a story. That isn't real. There's no way."

"It's real Alice," Chase repeated. "It's all real."

I shook my head. It had to be some elaborate prank. Everyone liked pulling pranks on me since I was so gullible. I wouldn't let them have the pleasure this time. "No, this is just some weird dream. I will wake up and it will all be over."

"No, Alice, this isn't a dream. Alice Liddell was a real person. She told everything to a certain Lewis Carroll and he wrote the story down. He warped quite a few things but this place is real. This is Wonderland."

I shoved him away and stood up. I didn't like people that tried and pranked me. I was pretty gullible at times but not this gullible. "This is just some trick. You are lying. Tell me the truth!"

"We aren't lying," Melvin added. "And we need your help."

"My help?" That seemed strange. I was just some random girl they grabbed from school. How could they say such a thing? "What would you need my help for?"

Malcolm held out his hand. "It's hard to understand. We have to take you to someone who can explain all of this."

I stomped my foot on the ground. It seemed childish, I knew, but I wanted my answers given to me. This was all just so confusing. "I'm not going anywhere until I understand what's going on."

"Come on Alice, don't you want an adventure? Don't you dream of such things? I see you reading all those fantasy and sci-fi novels and manga. Now you can live this one out." Chase smiled widely.

I stared at him and that is when I remembered. “Your eyes! What’s wrong with your eyes?”

“Can’t you tell?” He disappeared from where he was standing and appeared next to me. “I’m the Cheshire Cat.”

I jumped away from him. “What the hell? How did you do that?”

“Chase, did you really have to tell her that?” Melvin looked annoyed. “You could have scared her out the door.”

“Well she’s going to wonder why I look like a cat anyway. Might as well tell her now.”

I examined Melvin a little closer. That was when I noticed part of his orange hair seemed off. “Melvin, are those... Bunny ears?”

He sighed. “They are *rabbit* ears. Not bunny ears.”

Not able to help myself, I reached over and squeezed them.

Melvin jumped back, out of my reach and rubbed them. “Ouch! Every time a human comes here they do that! Why? It’s annoying! You don’t see me touching your ears all the time.”

“But you are human.” I kept staring at him, feeling a little bad that I had violated him like that. I just couldn’t help myself.

“Nothing is what it is in Wonderland, Alice.” Chase motioned around him. “Nothing is what it is and everything is what it isn’t.”

I looked at all four of them with their suits and at the rest of the room. Old wooden desks, leather chairs and couches, bookcases, it was like something straight out of a storybook. It couldn’t be possible, someone had to have been pulling a trick on me. “You’re all crazy.”

“Well, he is.” Malcolm nodded to Chase. “The rest of us are quite sane.”

“Ha!” Chase belted. “There is a reason they call you the Mad Hatter, is there not?”

Malcolm sighed and rubbed his temple. “No one has called me that in a long time. They just call me The Hatter.”

“The *what*?” There was no way he could be the Mad Hatter, Malcolm was way too young and not to mention *sane*.

“Have you not read the story?” Chase asked. “Because you seem surprised by a lot of this.”

“I have, but that was written over a century ago. You can’t be them. Not to mention it is a work of fiction”

“Oh, but we are.” Chase disappeared and reappeared on the bookcase. “Time means nothing here. We still play our parts one way or another.”

I turned to Davis and Melvin. “Then who are these two?” I looked a little closer at Davis. “And Davis has some weird ears... like a mouse.”

“The March Hare and the Dormouse of course,” Chase answered, appearing next to Dormouse, and leaned against him. “Can’t you tell a pathetic mouse when you see one?”

Davis’ eyes narrowed. “Watch it, Cat.”

Chase stepped back. “Oh, I’m so scared. What are you going to do? Throw cheese at me?”

“You two need to knock it off. Alice here is confused and you two are just making fun of each other,” Melvin exclaimed.

Davis turned to Melvin and pointed at Chase. “I’m not the problem here, he is! I haven’t done anything wrong so don’t blame me.”

Chase wrapped his arm around Davis’ shoulder. “Oh, stop being such a baby.”

They started arguing again, and Malcolm stepped forward, away from the cat-mouse fight, holding out his hand. “Let’s go, we will take you to someone who can explain everything more clearly.”

I looked down at his hand and back to his eyes. Malcolm had honest eyes, I could tell he was someone I could trust, along with everyone else here. I had nothing to lose, really, as I was stuck in this place anyway at least. If I left them I would be completely lost.

“Okay, I will go with you. But first can I get a change of clothes?” I looked down at my pajamas. “I don’t want to venture around in pajamas if that is okay with you.”

“Yeah, pipsqueak here should have something in your size.” Chase placed his hand on Davis’ shoulder.

“Hey!”

Chase shrugged. “It’s true.”

Dodging Davis’ punch, Chase laughed as he grabbed my hand and pulled me up the stairs.

CHAPTER 7

Davis' clothes actually did fit me perfectly. He was a smaller size than me, but I guess it would make sense since he was the Dormouse. It was weird to wear a boy who I hardly knew's clothes, especially when he seemed like something out of the 1800s. Don't get me wrong, I loved the era, it was just weird seeing everyone wear such things, except at a con of course.

I wore a dark pink suit, with brown pants and a purple vest and bowtie. I felt a bit ridiculous in it, as it definitely wasn't something I would ever wear in the real world. It was too fancy for me, I was used to getting paint everywhere so there was no way I could ever wear this at home. But that didn't matter right now as I wouldn't be painting any time soon.

Adding the purple hat, I just laughed. This was one strange dream indeed. At least, I hoped it was a dream. If this was real, it wasn't quite hitting me yet.

I came down the stairs to find all the boys staring up at me. I hated being the center of everyone's attention, especially when everyone looking at me was male. I took a deep breath and smiled.

"Fits perfectly."

"Told ya it would fit." Chase nudged Davis. Davis frowned and crossed his arms, not saying a word in response.

"Well, all in all, you look fabulous, m'lady." Malcolm placed his hand out for mine at the end of the stairs. I grabbed it, blushing, and took the final step. This was like a dream come true, though I had dreamt I was going to prom with him and was wearing a dress instead of a suit. And we weren't in Wonderland. "We should be heading to Howard's hideout now, since you're already here."

"Who's Howard?" I asked as he lead me and the others outside. It was still silent down this passageway and I began to wonder if anyone else could travel down here; it was Wonderland after all, maybe they couldn't see it. Perhaps, only some could see Wonderland.

"He is the one who knew to bring you here. He is the one who can really explain more fully about everything that is going on," Malcolm explained.

It wasn't the answer I wanted to hear but it would do. The promise that someone would explain was good enough for me. Besides, this had to be some kind of dream, there was no way that it could be possible that Wonderland really existed. I probably hit my head while closing my window, and right now, I probably lay in my room, my face in a plate full of paint.

We walked through the grassy streets. I followed beside Malcolm and Chase. Malcolm had a sort of regal stature about him, honest and true. He seemed like a man who had a high ranking job, which seemed weird since he looked like a teenage boy. He seemed to be calm and collected, which was strange given that he is the influence for the Mad Hatter in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I wondered what happened and what changed him to be more calm and not just recklessly indulging in tea all the time.

Chase, on the other hand, was always a troublemaker at school and I could tell he was one here as well. I have heard of him starting riots in classes and getting sent to the principal's office time and time again. But his troublemaking saved my life, so I knew I could trust him. I would be stupid not to, he had only been kind to me this entire time. But yeah, he was definitely the Cheshire Cat.

Glancing around, I realized that I still couldn't see the other's faces. Everyone around me had a dark cloud over their face, like a mask. It was disturbing to say the least.

"Why can't I see their faces?" I asked as we walked past a group of people.

"That's the problem that has encased the whole Kingdom. It was why we started looking for you," Malcolm explained.

"Kingdom? You mean the Heart Kingdom?"

Malcolm shook his head. "No, they were destroyed by Alice long ago. The Red and White Kingdom also fought and destroyed each other. This is the new authority, the Kingdom of Dreams."

I shook my head. "I have never heard of it."

"You wouldn't," Malcolm went on. "It came after the original Alice left. This Kingdom is a place where human's dreams reside. Each person here is a person's dream in your world. This is where they prosper and escape to."

"So then what is the problem? What is the war you mentioned?" Because it sure didn't look like a war was going on. This place seemed

perfect other than the weird shadow faces.

“The problem is that the Cirque de Rêves came out of nowhere and started entertaining the citizens, the dreams. We didn’t know it at the time, but there is a dark presence controlling the circus, causing the people to become dark and pretty much wither away, destroying the dreams of people in the human world.”

Definitely sounded like a fantasy. *What was this*, Sailor Moon? Would I be getting Sailor Scout powers? Because that would be cool. I wanted to ask but knew I would sound like a complete otaku if I did.

“That doesn’t make sense. So people’s dreams in the real world are being destroyed here?”

He nodded. “Yes, human dreams have always resided here. The more your world grew, the more this world grew as well. Those who keep their dreams at heart stay here and those who have given up on their dreams vanish from this world and just go on suffering, feeling empty in your world. But it is their own choice to let the dreams escape and crumble. That isn’t what is happening now, now the circus is causing the dreams to wither from the inside out. Humans have no control over it on the outside. The repercussions on your world will be tremendous if it isn’t stopped.”

None of it sounded real. How could that even be possible? I still debated if this was some dream, a dream I would love to express through dance or art. However, there was always the off chance that this was real, that some miracle has occurred and I was indeed trapped in Wonderland. “How is the Circus doing this?”

“They are creating darkness that captures the soul of the dream,” Malcolm explained with a bit of a sigh. “We didn’t know it until it was too late. It has taken both our Queen and King and turned them against those who still have dreams. Only a few of us got out and are trying to stop it before it goes too far.”

“Like you all?” I glanced at the others. Each one of them nodded.

Chase winked. “Yes, like us, Alice.”

I turned back to Malcolm. “Have you been to this Circus?”

A bit of remorse was apparent in his eyes. “Yes.”

“Then why aren’t you affected?” It seemed like a good question, as these were the few people who didn’t have dark shadows across their faces.

I wondered what made them so special, other than being in the original story.

He smiled. “The Cirque de Rêves uses fear to get to the soul of dreams. It’s how it clouds everyone’s mind. He makes you see your darkest fear and lets you live it. It kills the dreams and they become living nightmares. It didn’t work on me though, as I have learned long ago not to live in fear.”

I wondered what he meant by that. How could one learn to not live in fear? Even I was afraid of the future, but I tried my hardest not to let go of my dreams. “What about the rest of you?”

Chase raised his hand. “I’m too free-spirited for anything to hold me down. Fear is nothing to a cat like me.”

“I have been at the Hatter’s side since the beginning,” Melvin explained. “So like him, I have learned to live with my fears.”

“And as for this mouse here.” Chase wrapped his arm around Davis. “He is always afraid so he doesn’t know the difference between fake fear and real fear.”

Davis’ face turned red. Chase apparently always knew what buttons to push. “Shut up, cat! It’s because I am stronger than most other people around. Only strong people can live in fear and endure it every day.”

“Sure it is.”

Davis tried to hit Chase but Chase disappeared and reappeared in front of us, laughing. Davis started chasing him around the group, which was odd to think about how a mouse could chase a cat. It was hopeless, though, as Davis could never catch up to him.

I turned my attention back to the buildings around us. I noticed that the people, or I guess they were dreams, didn’t pay attention to us like they had before when I first came to this place. Was it because of my clothes and how I actually blended in now?

There was still a lot I didn’t know and a lot I still wanted to understand. I either wished I could be told everything that was going on and why I was needed or just wake up from this very strange dream.

“Why am I here?”

Malcolm let out a brief sigh. “That is very complicated. Howard is really the best man to ask that question, he was the one who sent us to find you. Honestly, we aren’t even quite sure why we need you.”

“Is he like some kind of mentor or something?”

Chase opened his arms wide. “He is so much more than that! He is like a father to us. He has taught us so much over the years and has brought us together to save the kingdom, which honestly I didn’t think was possible, am I right *Mad Hatter*?”

I turned to Malcolm but he didn’t say a word. His eyes darted in Chase’s direction, scowling.

“Geez,” Chase said. “Didn’t mean to hit a sore spot.”

“But yes,” Malcolm went on. “He is like our mentor. Even when something seems impossible, or everyone has turned their backs on us, he has been there with open arms. We owe a lot to him, each and every one of us.”

I nodded as if I understood, but honestly I didn’t. Most adults that I knew didn’t think that I knew what was good for myself, that art wasn’t a suitable career path for any human. The only adult that did support me was Mrs. B., but other than just a few supportive words here and there, it wasn’t like I felt I could talk to her about everything. I found these boys to be lucky, but then again I didn’t know the whole story. I learned to never be jealous of someone who appeared to have what you wanted on the outside, because you just never knew what their story was.

“So who is behind this Circus?” I asked as the quiet was starting to freak me out a bit. I always got nervous when it was quiet, which is why people thought I was more social than I really was. Truthfully I just hated awkward silence. I was usually the one who started making a turtle with my hands.

“A man who calls himself Morpheus,” Melvin answered. He looked a bit annoyed at just the thought of him.

I let out a brief laugh. “As in the God of Dreams?”

“You know your Greek mythology well,” Malcolm commented.

And the Matrix. “I like stories,” I explained, a little excited at the thought of the connection between mythology and this place. “Whether they be ancient or not. Anyways, to call himself a god, he must be a little full of himself then.”

“Is he full of himself? He has converted many citizens as you have seen.” Malcolm waved his hand to gesture towards those who stood near us.

I took a look around. He was right, there were a lot of people and I couldn’t see any of their faces. I wondered if it was like that everywhere or

in just this part of the kingdom. Either way, it was still a lot of people. He had to be strong to be able to convert so many people. It was hard to think that the people around me were the personifications of people's dreams in the real world. I wondered how many people around me I actually knew.

"How big is this kingdom?" I asked.

Chase opened up his arms. "It's huge! This is just one section called the Garden District."

"How many districts are there?"

"Within this kingdom? About two dozen," Chase answered. "Most people stay within the kingdom but there are others who are from outside the kingdom, which is where the ruins of Heart, Red, and White Kingdoms are."

"Two dozen? Wow. Where is the Circus?" As I didn't see any tents around this area, and this place seemed too strange to have a Circus going on, which was odd to think, really.

"In the heart of Wonderland, near the Dark Forest. They were smart when they figured out how to infiltrate the kingdom—so obviously no one even saw it coming."

That made sense, sometimes the best place to hide something was right in front of other people's faces. "Which is how the King and Queen were affected so fast."

Chase shrugged. "It was more complicated than that but I don't want to get into the details just yet. Howard will be able to explain more than any of us."

I nodded. "All right, what can you tell me?"

He grinned. "That math test was hard, how did you do on it?"

I shoved him as we made it to the boundary of the Garden District.

CHAPTER 8

I gasped as we stepped outside the walls of the Garden District. The mountains and forests surrounded the area with trees larger than life. I felt like I was in the Redwood forest somehow surrounded by the Alps. I had never seen anything so majestic. I couldn't wait to get back home and paint what I had seen, but I knew I would never be able to bring this scene justice.

"So where exactly are we going? I mean I know we are going towards where Howard is, but other than that I'm not sure." I asked as I stared up at the trees we walked beneath. They were tall, like friggin' tall. I didn't want to know what happened when one of them fell.

It would be loud and destructive, that's what would happen.

"You see where those two hills meet in the distance?" Melvin pointed. I nodded. "That is where we are going."

"And we are walking the entire way?" I asked, hoping that was not the case. I knew it was, I hadn't seen one type of vehicle during the entire time we were walking. Strange, really, but this world wasn't like ours, and maybe they didn't want to draw any attention.

"Yes, we should be there before nightfall," he started down the steep slope as I kept staring forward at what direction we were heading towards. Nothing like a good hike after practically no sleep and being dumped into an entirely new world. At least I wasn't in my pajamas anymore. Always look on the positive side of things, that was my motto, or at least I tried to make it my motto.

I followed the boys down the slope, slipping and sliding most of the way. The ground was a bit wet causing a muddy mess. Sometimes I thought I was definitely going to fall on my butt, but alas I did not, thankfully. Nothing new for an Oregon girl though.

I started to fall behind the rest of them, typical. Although I was good at ballet and balancing, my fear of falling off of something was still pretty high. I didn't like the thought of falling and getting my clothes muddy, then having to walk all that way to get to wherever we were going. Walking with muddy wet clothes was horrible, absolutely *horrible*. So I was more careful

than they were and that made me start to fall behind. And them being typical boys didn't give a crap. So at least that was the same between this world and my world.

It was still strange to think that I was in a different world, that is if this wasn't just a dream. I think in the back of my mind I really still thought it was a dream and that was why the 'freak-out' factor hadn't hit me yet. That, or maybe I just watched too much anime that I didn't find this to be as horrible as a normal person would. Then again, did I truly understand the stakes here? Probably not, but I also had no idea why I was brought here nor why some little boy had tried to kill me.

We finally got to the bottom of the large hill the Garden District was on. As I approached where the rest of the boys were, I noticed they were ducked under the overgrowth, watching something in the distance. Chase grabbed my wrist and pulled me down next to them.

"Careful, they're on the lookout for us," he said in a hushed tone.

I looked towards where they were staring. Five men on horseback were riding across the forest, not too far from where we were. Each was on a dark horse except one had a white horse. He must have been the leader, as that was how it typically was in the movies. I couldn't get a very good look at many of them, but from what I could tell, they looked like officers for the Dream Kingdom as they were all wearing blue trench coats.

"Who are they?" I asked.

Melvin was the one who answered. "They are the Queen's royal guard. The one on the white horse is Bill. He is really good at tracking prey, second best at finding anyone in all the kingdoms."

"Who's the best?"

Malcolm turned and smiled. "Me." He held out his hand. "Now let's go, we have to hurry if we want to get past him. Chase, come with us. The rest of you go around and hope they follow you instead of us."

Melvin nodded and took Davis with him. They headed around the other way while Malcolm pulled me with him, Chase following just behind us. He seemed a little hesitant at first, as if not wanting to follow Malcolm or take orders from him. It was barely noticeable, and I wouldn't have thought anything of it, but he didn't let the frown leave his face. Was he mad at Malcolm for some reason? There was a lot I didn't know about this group, but they always had seemed close at school.

Then again, at school, I wouldn't have thought they were all fictional characters, though I still wasn't sure that this wasn't all some kind of dream.

Malcolm led the two of us the opposite way Davis and Melvin had headed. He took such care in each spot he put his foot that I made sure to step exactly where he did, stop when I was told to, and go on as well. Thank goodness for my ballet classes, otherwise I probably would have lost my balance a few times and fallen flat on my face. That would have been embarrassing.

Chase seemed to be following as well, but he also almost acted like he wanted to go off the path and do his own thing. I just wished he would voice his thoughts instead of holding them in, then again we probably had to be as quiet as we could so that they didn't hear us.

As we came around another tree, Malcolm stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"He is on to us." He pinched the bridge of his nose. I didn't like how frustrated he looked, as it meant I needed to worry. "Crap, we have to get you out of here." Malcolm searched all around, then finally looked up. "How fast can you climb?"

I blinked. "What?"

He pointed at the tree. "Up. Go."

I looked at the tree that towered beside me and gulped. I had never been good at climbing up trees, even small ones. It just wasn't my cup of tea, so to speak. I'd honestly rather dig and hide in a ditch than go up a tree.

Malcolm must have seen the worry on my face, as he nodded to Chase and pushed me forward. "Chase, help her. I will distract them and get them to follow me. Wait until I come back for you. Got that? Do *not* leave this tree unless I say so." He made eye contact. "Do you understand?"

Chase reluctantly nodded and jumped up to the closest branch with ease, holding out his hand. "Come on, it's easy."

Frowning, I grabbed his hand and he helped me up the branch. I was already out of my comfort zone and not quite sure what exactly was going on, I didn't need to also be made fun of for not knowing how to get up a tree.

At first, I was surprised at how well he could navigate the tree, then I realized he was a cat and it would come with the territory. It was still weird

to see his eyes in such a way but I was starting to get used to it. That, or I was just autocorrecting it to normal eyes in my head. That seemed more likely.

I peered down, which was a huge mistake honestly, and realized that I indeed had a fear of heights. *Or maybe it was a fear of falling?* I started to wobble but Chase quickly grabbed me.

“Careful, this isn’t somewhere you wanna miss a step. Long way down.”

“Yeah, I see that. Thanks for the tip.”

He helped me up a bit higher and we stopped at the point where we could still almost see the ground, but high enough where I wanted to just cling to the tree and never move again. I didn’t care for heights, or I guess I didn’t care for falling. The latter came with the former.

Chase patted my back. “There, there, don’t worry. I won’t let you fall.”

“Gee, thanks.”

He shrugged and sat down on the branch, cross-legged. “Just trying to help. You need to be like me and not worry about heights. Just land on your feet.”

I gave him a skeptical look. Yeah I definitely could land on my feet, but then I would have a knee coming out of my shoulder blade. I shuddered at the thought of hitting the ground that hard. So gross.

Just as I was about to say something, Chase put out his hand to quiet me. I looked at him quizzically but then I realized why he didn’t want me to say anything. The Queen’s guards were right under us.

They looked human enough, none seemed to look strange like Chase, not that he looked too different than a normal human being. Bill came on a white horse and searched all around, looking for us. I backed closer to the tree so that he couldn’t spot me.

I could see his dark brown hair that was slicked back. He wore a blue trench coat and from what I could tell, he sat straight up as if he had great authority over anything and everything. The other four men followed behind, waiting for the man’s orders.

“Come out Hatter, I know you are around here!” Bill’s voice boomed through the forest. Chase must have noticed me quiver for he put his arm around me.

“Don’t worry, they can’t see us,” he whispered into my ear.

I nodded, although I found that to be very unlikely. If he was such a good tracker and was right below our tree, how could he not know we were up there? I tried to calm my thoughts down about the situation as I peered back down at Bill.

“Is that a challenge Bill or do you know the only way for you to win is for me to give up?” Malcolm’s voice answered back. I couldn’t find where Malcolm was standing and dared not shift to find out. I just hoped he would be okay, but I trusted him for some reason. Mainly because he had lasted this long and hadn’t gotten caught.

“Oh, on the contrary.” Bill answered. “I will find you and that girl you are hiding. Do you really think she can bring down the Cirque de Rêves? Nothing can stop him, you can see that yourself. You are wasting your time!”

“If I am wasting my time, why are you looking for her? If she poses no threat, stop wasting *your* time.”

Bill let out a loud belly laugh. “You would like me to do that, wouldn’t you? Just because I know I don’t have anything to worry about doesn’t mean that you all aren’t being a nuisance. The Queen has ordered me to destroy all that are against the Cirque de Rêves, and you my friend have betrayed us all.”

“You are making a mistake,” Malcolm added. It sounded like he was coming from all around, I had no idea where he could be. “The Cirque de Rêves has blinded you. I must stop it before we can never go back.”

“We will see about that,” I watched as Bill pulled out his gun and started firing into the woods. I jumped at the noise and Chase squeezed my hand.

“It will be all right,” he whispered. “Malcolm knows what he is doing. He has been doing this sort of thing his whole life. And unlike in your world, that is a very long time here.”

I nodded as I watched the horses gallop away into the distance after Malcolm. I didn’t like the idea of something happening to him because of me. I would never forgive myself, even though it wasn’t my choice to be here. I still felt as if I could have done something.

Chase and I waited up in the tree for what seemed like an hour. We didn’t hear anything from Bill and his men, but neither did we hear from Malcolm or the others yet. I was beginning to worry and wanted to ask

Chase what he thought but I didn't want to make a sound. I had no idea if they were close and I was afraid of getting caught.

Unlike me, Chase looked calm, his eyes closed and ears attentive. If he was like a cat, he should be able to hear from quite far away. I wondered how exactly they worked and how he could have some feline characteristics and some human characteristics.

Suddenly Chase's ears twitched and his eyes shot open. Then I heard it too, a whistle coming from below us.

"Well." Chase jumped down to a lower branch. "That is our cue."

I smiled as I climbed down behind him. We were finally able to leave this tree and be on our way. I could get answers and stop worrying about Bill capturing us.

I forgot how high up we truly were until I was almost to the ground. Looking back up, I couldn't even see the branch that we were once waiting on. I shuddered at the thought if I had slipped. Good thing Chase was with me or I wouldn't have been able to overcome my fear, or I would have gone up and easily slipped.

As I thought this, I knew I would jinx myself. It was a curse I had, even though I was graceful in ballet, I was sometimes quite clumsy in other things. As I stepped on the last branch before hitting the ground, I felt my foot slip and I started to fall backwards. I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for my body to meet with the hard forest floor. I just hoped my head wouldn't hit a rock, that would be the worst. When a couple seconds went by and nothing happened, I opened my eyes to find myself in Malcolm's arms.

"You should be more careful, we don't want to draw attention back to us, now do we?" His smile made me blush.

"No," I whispered and straightened back up, dusting off my clothes as I had gotten some bark and dirt all over Davis' clothes he let me borrow. I just hoped I wouldn't stain it. "Thank you."

"No problem."

I glanced over at Chase, who was frowning at the entire incident. I wanted to say something but I had no idea what I could tell him to make him smile again. Whatever was going on between them likely had more to do with each other than the present circumstances. Maybe I would find out about it later, even though it really wasn't any of my business.

I looked around for Davis and Melvin. “Where are the others?”

“They are already on their way to Howard’s.” Malcolm nodded deeper into the forest. “We will be meeting them there. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 9

As we approached the edge of the forest, we came upon the once magnificent White and Red Kingdom. The chess pieces that once stood glorious but were now crumbled away with time gave those in *Harry Potter* a run for their money. The statues and monuments were larger than any building in Salem, but that really wasn't saying much. Salem didn't have any skyscrapers, heck they didn't have any buildings higher than 345 feet, and that was the height of the spire at the First United Methodist Church built in 1872. It had been over a hundred years and still no one had built anything higher than that. Salem felt like it was stuck in time, and I wasn't exaggerating. Some of the clothes I saw people wearing on a day-to-day basis were out of fashion long ago.

Then again, I was wearing Victorian-style clothing. I guess I wasn't one who could talk.

Everything around the area was colored in either a red or white decor. It made sense, since it was the Red and White Kingdoms. It really stood out and I couldn't believe that I was standing in a city that had been from a work of fiction.

The ground had red and white tiles, just like a chess board. If I wasn't there, I would have never believed it. All the buildings were designed like medieval castles, with moats in some areas and everything. It was abandoned, though, just like they said it was. No one lived here, there were no people in the streets, no voices of conversation. There was nothing but us.

"So this is where your leader is? Was he part of this kingdom?" I asked as we passed yet another moat. I looked down in it and saw something green move around.

Malcolm shook his head. "No, he has been around before the Red and White Kingdom existed, in fact he was around before the Heart Kingdom as well. No one knows where he is from, he just comes when he is needed."

"Such as now with the Circus?"

"Yes."

So he was like the mysterious mentor in all the stories, like Obi-Wan or Gandalf. That was pretty cool. “Who is he, in the stories I mean?”

Chase was the one to answer that. “He is known as the Caterpillar.”

I remembered that chapter in the story. From what I remember from the book, I always found him rather annoying, and I couldn’t believe that he could be such a grand mentor now. “The Caterpillar? I thought in the story he turned into a butterfly or something.”

Chase laughed. “The story isn’t exact, word-to-word, remember?”

“I see,” I lied. I really didn’t understand. None of this made sense. “I still don’t get why I’m important.”

“He had a premonition about you. He told us where to find you so you could help us,” Chase whispered so that I only could hear him.

“A what?” I whispered in return. “And why are we whispering?”

“A premonition. A dream, if you will. Those of this world are different than those who represent dreams. He can explain it better than any of us. And I’m whispering because we aren’t supposed to tell you anymore until we have arrived.”

So that’s what it was. Did they know more than they were letting on? Why was it so important that Howard tell me everything? It was obvious that Chase wanted to tell me more, but something was holding him back. Why that was, I had no idea. It would make sense for them to just tell me everything right away so I would understand, but if Howard had more answers than them, I guess talking to him would be a better idea.

I was also curious why Chase seemed to despise Malcolm. I didn’t think that in the stories I’d read that the Cheshire Cat and the Mad Hatter hated each other. *Did they always or was it something that happened recently?* As they mentioned, the story I knew had been warped by the writer. In fact, in the stories that I knew, Chase had been an actual cat, not part human. I wonder if that fact had to do with Carroll not understanding they were anamorphic or if Alice just didn’t mention it when returning from Wonderland.

We still hadn’t caught sight of Davis and Melvin. I hoped that they were all right and didn’t get captured by Bill and his men. I had no idea what kind of things they would do, if it was like the stories they would have their heads cut off. But that was the Heart Kingdom, not the Dream Kingdom. Either way I still worried.

“You have nothing to be afraid of, Alice.” Malcolm grabbed my hand and kissed it gently. “We will be here with you.”

I felt myself blush. Realistically, there wasn't any reason I should trust him nor any of the others. They pretty much kidnapped me and brought me here without telling me why they needed me. But for some reason I felt as if I could trust them. I felt as if this was where I was supposed to be, but that didn't really 't make any sense. I was somewhere that wasn't supposed to be real. But this world had everything I'd always wanted, an adventure, the boy I had a crush on, new things to explore.

A place where I could be myself.

But was that true? I mean, did I actually ever act like myself around others, I wondered. Did I really know how to act around others or was it all just a lie? Was I simply trying to fit in all the time, or was this who I was? I felt as if I didn't know anymore, not after the condemning I received from my parents and the shadows I hide in at school. So the question really was, *who was I?*

“And if he's not to your fitting, I will be here for you Alice.” Chase grabbed me and pulled me away from Malcolm. “I'm a better protector than that *Mad Hatter* over there.”

Malcolm shot him a look. “In your dreams, *Cat*.”

I chuckled at their arguing but decided to change the subject, as I could tell that it was only going to get worse. “So you guys have been looking for me for a while then. You have been at school for a month now.”

“Yes. We had to make sure you were the right person. We can't just bring any human here,” Malcolm answered.

I stopped and watched them carefully. “Why, what happens?”

“They don't accept the change and well...” Malcolm trailed off.

“Well what?”

“They die,” Chase answered as a matter of fact.

“Die?” I exclaimed.

Chase nodded and smiled as if it were some kind of game. “Yes, their bodies don't accept this world and they disappear, both from here and the real world. It's as if they never existed in the first place. No one remembers them, except for those here. But in the real world, there is no one there to remember them, no one to mourn them. It's for the best, really, as no one in your world will know the truth. It's better that way.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. How many people had disappeared? How many people didn't accept the change and simply ceased to exist? I had accidentally arrived to this place after getting pushed in the locker. Does that mean I could have died if I wasn't the one they were looking for?

"Speaking of which, how is your head?" Malcolm asked.

I placed my hand on my forehead. I had forgotten all about it. "Fine. There's no more pain."

"Good, you don't have anything to worry about then." He smiled, as if trying to reassure me. It didn't work, I still worried that I would suddenly disappear and everything would be gone. My existence would be no more.

But in the back of my head, I wondered if that truly would be a bad thing. My family didn't like me, I only caused them trouble. I only had one true friend, and if I were gone, she was sure to have other friends, as she already had a lot more friends than I ever did. Would anyone really miss me if I was gone?

It was only a slight thought, a doubt really, and it passed as soon as it came. Even though my family disagreed with me, I knew they still loved me and Kate was my best friend and neither of us would have it any other way.

I turned to Chase. "You mean I could have died if I wasn't the correct person?"

"But you are so you're fine." Chase placed his hand on my shoulder. "So don't worry about it. I wouldn't have brought you here if I didn't think you would be fine."

"But why did you erase my memories? Why didn't you just explain all of this earlier?"

"Because we weren't ready. We still aren't ready but the White Rabbit found you and made the first move."

"White Rabbit?" I questioned. "Like the creature that Alice follows into Wonderland?"

"Yes, that little kid that tried to kill you was the White Rabbit," Chase explained. "So in a way, he brought you to Wonderland just like the original Alice."

The little kid, I had almost forgotten. "That little kid was the White Rabbit?"

“Yes, don’t let appearances fool you, he is a dangerous person. He is the Queen and King’s right-hand man.”

“Which brings me to another question, why do you all look so young? I mean you look older than you say for school but you can’t be more than twenty and that is pushing it.”

Chase shrugged. “Age doesn’t matter here. Most people are young here because the dreams that reside here are those of younger generations. Most of them disappear when they get to a certain age, others stay but it’s rare. Most people let go of their dreams. They don’t think they are as important when they are older.”

“You mean people give up on their dreams? And therefore their existence here is gone.”

“Yes, and they disappear into nothing. The problem now is that Morpheus is destroying dreams that haven’t been forgotten yet, causing chaos on your side. People are becoming depressed, losing their vision, and even losing reality.”

That made sense, in a way. I did feel like I was seeing less people my age really pursuing what they wanted. There was a sadness that was spreading through my generation. “And somehow I am supposed to fix it all.”

He winked. “Something like that.”

“And how in the world am I supposed to do that?” I asked because truly I had no idea what I was doing there. And on top of that, I really believed I was still asleep. When was this dream going to end? It all felt so real though and was quite strange.

Once we approached the castle, Malcolm and Chase escorted me inside. I gasped at how grand it was on the inside just as it was on the outside. Although the rooms were high and mighty, there wasn’t much left in the way of decor. It seemed to me that it all had been raided, taken away for some other use or exchanged for money, if money existed here, I really didn’t know how this world worked. There was a hierarchy and that was all I knew.

The castle was quiet, footsteps echoing through the hallways. It felt like walking through an old church during the week when no one was there. Very eerie to say the least, especially since the only lighting came from the dirt-covered windows, making the room dim enough that it was nearly

impossible to see what was in front of me. I grabbed Chase's hand, mostly because I couldn't see anything around and knew with his cat eyes that he indeed could. I noticed that Malcolm glanced over at our hands but didn't say anything. I just hoped he didn't think anything of it. I really just trusted that Chase could see, and this entire time he had been more open to me than the rest of them. God, I didn't know what to think.

We finally came to a room that had a fire roaring in it. It felt good against my skin as it was starting to grow dark outside and a chill had swept through the land. As we entered, two people stood up from the couch with a smile on their faces.

"You made it!" Davis sprung up and ran towards us. He wrapped his arms around me. "I'm so glad you didn't get caught, I was so worried."

"Uh, thanks? Really it is thanks to Malcolm, he was able to get us into the clear," I said, not quite sure what to do as a boy was hugging me.

Chase grabbed him by the collar and pulled him away from me. "Get off of her, you perv!"

"I'm not a perv, I was just happy to see her!" Davis yelled back.

"Yeah, yeah, like I haven't heard that one before. Give her some space, will ya? You think she wants some disgusting rodent touching her?"

Davis pushed Chase. "Stop calling me a rodent!"

Malcolm stepped up, which I was glad. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know them well enough to feel I could barge in on their conversation. "Knock it off you two, can you act civilized for once in your life?"

Chase appeared as if he was going to say something, but didn't. His ears just turned down like when a cat was annoyed.

"Well, the time has come at last, I see," a voice said behind me. I turned to find an older gentleman with greying blonde hair. His blue eyes appeared to have seen so much through the years.

"Alice," the man greeted. "At last we finally meet. I am Howard, or you may better know me as the Caterpillar."

CHAPTER 10

I stood there in awe, not quite believing that the man who stood in front of me was the wise Caterpillar from the stories. I mean, it wasn't that he looked stupid or anything, I just never imagined him being a scraggly man with worn-out clothes and greying scruff on his face. But by the way he stood, I could tell he had an air of authority about him, and that was all I needed to believe him.

I bowed to him out of respect. It was strange to do as an American, yes, but after Japanese class and watching so much anime, it really just became a habit that I picked up. It was better to be formal than it was to be less so. "Please to meet you."

He laughed. "Please, you don't need to use such formalities. It's not like I'm a king or something. I'm just a man who has been around for a while, a tired one at that."

I straightened up. "So, can you tell me, what is going on?"

He walked over towards the fire. "How much do you know, miss Alice?"

"Not much really, I just know there is a Dream Kingdom and the Cirque de Rêves is trying to destroy people's dreams in my world. That, and I know that I am involved somehow. That is about it."

"Good, good. I don't have to start from scratch. I am glad my boys were able to give you that much."

"There is still a lot I don't quite understand, I was told that you would explain it all."

He nodded. "Yes, in due time. But first, Alice, I would like to know what you think of this world."

I blinked. "What I think?"

"Yes, of this world and of the people you have met so far." He laughed. "I guess that is hard when they are standing right there in front of you. Boys, how about you give us some time alone so we can discuss everything. Alice is probably getting hungry, why don't you fix up some dinner?"

Malcolm nodded. "Yes sir." And with that, he left with the rest of them, who had gone to what I presumed would be the kitchen. Chase was the last

to leave, as if unsure if he should leave me there alone.

“There, now you can say anything you would like, they will never hear anything from me.” Howard grinned.

I always found it hard opening up to someone I didn’t know, even if they were supposed to be professionals. I had gone to a counselor when I was younger, my parents thought it was strange I was so introverted and quiet. They never got anywhere with me because, honestly, I didn’t want to change and I never could talk to someone I didn’t know that well.

I shrugged. “What am I supposed to say? This world is beyond my imagination, I’m flabbergasted at the thought of being in a children’s book.”

He chuckled. “Ah, yes, Lewis Carroll’s take on our little kingdom. He got some things wrong, of course. Whether or not that Alice was protecting us or if it was him not listening to her, I do not know.”

“Yes, well it is definitely a world that I never thought was possible to exist. And to find out that there’s some reason you all need me.”

He was silent for a moment then turned to the crackling fire. “But there is something else, isn’t there? That you want to talk about?”

I nodded. “I want to know if this is a dream. I want to know if this is just in my head or if it is real.”

“So, I’ll ask again. What do you think?”

“I think I hit my head while closing a window and I am lying on my floor in a pile of paint at home,” I honestly replied. There was no point to lie.

Howard frowned, his attention not leaving the flower. “You really believe that? Or is that just how you are coping with it all?”

I didn’t answer. Truthfully, I had never had a dream that seemed this real and lasted this long. I felt everything here, even the warmth of the fire on my skin.

“Besides,” he went on. “Even if it was a dream, would it matter? How do you know what is really a dream and what is reality? There once was a Chinese philosopher who had a dream he was a butterfly and he was full of joy and happiness. Then he woke up and realized he wasn’t a butterfly, but a man. Yet, in the dream, he had no recollection of being human, so he wonders was he truly human, or was he, in fact, the butterfly’s dream? Reality is a lot more complicated than any of us understand.”

A butterfly's dream? What was he trying to say? I stood there, watching as the fire crackled. A dream could seem real, I suppose, as in that story. But at the same time, how could I recall so many things in reality, usually in dreams you forget reality and only dream.

So this wasn't a dream. This was real. Which meant Wonderland was real and that I was missing from the real world.

I covered my mouth. "This is real. I can't leave, I can't get home. How do I get home?"

Howard frowned. "You can't, Alice, not until the Cirque de Rêves is destroyed."

My eyes widened. It never occurred to me that there would be no way out of this, I just thought at any moment I would wake up and be home. Even though it wasn't a dream, it was definitely turning out to be a nightmare. "What? What do you mean I can't?"

"The portal between dimensions is being watched closely. If you went home, you would be followed by the White Rabbit again, and you won't be so lucky to have Chase save you again. The only way to stop it is to destroy the Cirque de Rêves and then you will be safe."

I shook my head. "But why me? What does this have to do with me?"

"Let us start at the beginning Alice." He flicked his hand at the fire and the fire became alive. Figures appeared in the flames, figures of guards and a Queen in red. The guards danced around the Queen and all those who were citizens seemed to be bowing in front of her. I watched in amazement, surprised that the fire could do such a thing.

"A long time ago, Wonderland was ruled by the Kingdom of Hearts," Howard explained as the flames flashed into a great kingdom. People looked happy as they went about their day, smiling and talking to other figures.

"We lived in peace and harmony. That is, until the Queen came."

The flames roared up and many of the figures disappeared. Chaos ruled over the transfigured scene. Guards had their swords out, attacking the once happy citizens. The Queen stood up on a pedestal, laughing as her people were attacked, the people she was supposed to rule.

"She made everyone in Wonderland live in fear. This was supposed to be where people came to get away from everything, but not when she came

into power. She destroyed the link between worlds and the dreams that once thrived here vanished. Everyone hated her but we couldn't do anything."

The flame changed slowly, showing a girl in a dress following a rabbit down a hole. "Then one day, a little girl came into our world by the name of Alice."

"Just like in the stories," I said.

He nodded. "Yes, just like in the stories. No one knows how the white rabbit got to her or how she followed him, but she was able to go pass the barriers the Queen of Hearts put up."

The image of the white rabbit appeared, the little boy that had tried to kill me, but this time he had bunny ears just like Melvin.

"That's the boy who tried to kill me."

"Yes, we are getting to that." The Caterpillar turned back to the flames. "Alice came and questioned everything. She helped understand that we didn't have to live in fear any longer. Her and a group of us went against the Queen and the battle lasted days..."

The fire sparked up, the image of men on horses with swords fighting, and there in the middle of it all was a little girl. She fought alongside them all even though she was still just a little girl.

"And we won. We brought down the Kingdom of Hearts and as fast as she came, Alice left us. She didn't even say goodbye, but simply disappeared back into your world. But then something happened, the door was opened and human dreams came back once again. We thought everything was perfect, and that we would never have to worry about anything ever again. And never see Alice again."

Everything did seem perfect in the fire. People were appearing once again as a new Kingdom started to emerge. It was the Red and White Kingdom.

"But we were wrong. The Red and the White Kingdom started to have grudges against each other and fights broke out daily. The peace we knew for only a short time was going away yet again."

"Is that where we are now? In the Red and White Kingdom?" I asked.

Howard nodded. "Yes. They both wanted Wonderland for themselves and could never make a treaty. Many dreams were destroyed in the process."

The flames danced around again and suddenly Alice appeared. She was different, this time. She was older, just a bit older than I was.

“And then, as if by magic, Alice came back. She tried to put an end of the fighting but failed. Neither side would listen and she gave up. Alice then destroyed the Red and White Kingdom and vowed never to return to Wonderland.”

He waved his hands over the fire. “That’s when the Kingdom of Dreams came into existence. The King and Queen have ruled prosperously since the fall of the Red and White Kingdom. Then one day, a nightmarish circus came into the kingdom. No one suspected a thing, just a new district, a new place to venture to. But then bad things started happening—the dreams started becoming dark. Their faces clouded and some had even disappeared. The King and Queen found out but it was too late. They were also shrouded in the darkness.”

I shook my head. “But what does this have to do with me?”

He turned to face me. “I had a vision in this fire of a girl from the other side that could help us. A girl that also goes by Alice.”

“That’s not my real name, my name is Meredith. You have the wrong person.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder and looked at me straight in the eyes. “The name isn’t the important part. Besides, you survived the transition, which means you are meant to be here. You have a true heart Alice, and that is the only way you can defeat this being.”

“A true heart? There is no way. I’m just a teenager trying to find her way through this world. I’m not the girl you are looking for.”

“The fire wouldn’t lie Alice, you are the one that is supposed to be here. And it is up to you to accept that.”

I brushed off his hand and walked to the window. “There must be some mistake, I’m not a fighter, I’m not someone who can do this. I’m just an artist. There is no way I can fulfill the same shoes as that Alice did.”

“You are a girl with an artist’s imagination. With imagination you can do anything in this world. Don’t forget that.”

I shook my head. “But how am I supposed to defeat this power? I have no idea what is going on, let alone how to defeat it.”

“The original Alice left something in case she never returned. Something for her predecessor, which is you.”

“What did she leave?” I questioned.

He let out a sigh. “We aren’t sure, she never said and she hid it long ago. None of us have ever found it.”

“Well, that makes sense,” I whispered. I couldn’t believe after all that, she would hide it and not tell anyone. How was I supposed to find it when I didn’t even know this world? Everything was new, how would I know something was left for me.

“Just have faith Alice, the answer will come to you and you alone. We will be here to help in any way you need us.”

I felt a chilly wisp of air go through the room, as if the door opened. I glanced over but it was still closed. I went back towards the fireplace.

“I also wanted to know what you thought of my boys,” Howard said as he stepped up next to me.

I glanced up at him. “What about them?”

He shrugged. “Have they been nice? Protective? I know in the past that some of them have had some arguments with Alice. I just want to make sure history doesn’t repeat itself.”

I shook my head. “No, they have been very kind and generous to me. If they have any arguments, I would say it was with each other...” I realized I probably said too much.

Howard raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I mean, Chase and Davis don’t get along, like a cat and mouse. That isn’t surprising. But it seems like Malcolm and Chase have some other conflict going on, something that goes deeper than their roles. I don’t know what it is.”

Howard sighed. “I had hoped they had gotten past their difference, but I guess not. Don’t mind them, they just have had a bitter rivalry for a very long time. It won’t change, apparently.”

I looked back into the fire, watching it crackle and pop. “It’s strange though, they seemed like just normal teens at school. I would never have guessed that they had a life like this, I would never have guessed Malcolm...” I blushed, realizing I had pointed him out of all the rest. It was probably obvious I had a crush on him. *God, I was so stupid.*

Howard chuckled. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

I smiled and at that moment, I felt a chill go through the air again. I glanced around but there was still nothing that could have caused it.

“This is a lot to take in all at once, though,” I said. “I’m not sure if my mind even comprehends it.”

“I understand. If you need some alone time, I have a room prepared for you. You can use it to freshen up for dinner. There are some clothes that the original Alice left that I kept from when she visited the second time. They should fit you. I will have Chase show you the way. I have a feeling he is waiting for you outside.”

I nodded and blushed at the thought of Chase worrying about me. “Yeah, that would be nice.”

Just as he guessed, Chase was sitting cross-legged outside the door. Howard chuckled. “See that you’re guarding her closely.”

Chase quickly stood up. “Yeah, well you ordered me to.”

Howard nodded towards me. “Please, show her to her room so she can freshen up before dinner.”

Chase held out his hand. “Come on, Alice.”

CHAPTER 11

Chase took me to my room where I was able to find some clothes that did indeed fit me. I pulled out a more medieval-looking blue dress, something simple compared to Victorian-style clothing that would take a bit of time to put on. Although it was beautiful, I didn't particularly want to put a layered outfit on when I was only going to dinner.

"That dress will look really good on you," Chase said as he apparently was still in my room. I thought he had left, I had been so engrossed by the outfits.

I raised an eyebrow. "Perv. Give me some privacy so I can change."

He held his hands out in defense. "Just wanted to make sure you found everything all right. I will be right outside the door if you need me."

"Thanks," I said, and added. "Seriously, though, thank you for everything."

He simply smiled as he closed the door behind him.

I quickly changed into the dress. It was a bit long, but that was fine. I glanced at myself in the mirror and sighed. My hair was messed up completely from not having a shower and having been on the run since waking up in the middle of the night. Short hair liked acting out on its own accord. I was exhausted and I couldn't wait for dinner and then being able to pass out on the bed that sat behind me.

My stomach started growling and I decided I better head downstairs before my stomach hated me even more. I opened the door to find Chase still waiting for me.

His eyes widened. "Wow."

I shoved him. "Don't make fun of me, this was the fastest thing to put on."

"No, I meant wow you look beautiful in that. The color blue really suits you."

I blushed. "Shut up. Let's get downstairs to get something to eat."

I didn't particularly like receiving compliments on how I looked, it always made me blush and I really hated blushing when there were a lot of

guys around. I swore if I got another compliment my whole face would turn red.

We entered the dining hall, which was ridiculously large compared to anything I had ever seen before. It was as big as a theater, with a table that stretched from one end to the other. It was exactly like what you would see in a movie. I kept forgetting this was a castle and that a royal family used to live here.

Malcolm greeted me at the doorway. "Lovely as ever, follow me this way and sit next to me." He held out his hand. I glanced over at Chase, who was frowning. I didn't know what to do, but Malcolm did offer to seat me first. I grabbed his hand and he led me to the table and sat me next to him and Howard, who sat at the head of the table. Chase ended up sitting across from me.

"I see you found some clothes. They suit you nicely," Howard said.

I nodded. "Yes, I will return Davis' clothes right away. Is there a washer and dryer I can use or something?"

He laughed. "No, we don't have such things here. Don't worry about it, just leave them outside your door and someone will take care of them."

"Oh, okay. Thanks."

"Now." Howard raised his hand out to the food. "Let's eat!"

I have no idea how, but there was an entire feast ready to eat. There was no way that Malcolm and the others made this, it had to have been magic, I swore. I mean, we were in Wonderland after all, I supposed anything was possible.

In front of me was sandwiches of all different types; cucumber, chicken salad, egg salad, and of course, tuna salad. Chase grabbed about ten slices of the tuna salad sandwich. I laughed as he stuffed them in his mouth. It made sense now. He was such a cat.

Along with sandwiches, there were all types of pastries, both savory and sweet. There were ham and cheese ones, potato and cheese pie, cottage pie, strawberry, peach, you name it, it was on the table. I smiled as I grabbed a shepherd's pie one, and strawberry along with some egg salad sandwiches.

As for drinks, I should have guessed. There were at least seven pots of tea on the table. Malcolm had four glasses in front of him, each containing a different type of tea. He saw me staring at him.

"What is it?" Malcolm asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing, just that if I had any doubt of who you all were in the stories, I don’t anymore.”

Chase commented, his mouth full of tuna. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“There is a reason you all were portrayed as you were in the stories,” Howard said. “And none of you are helping your cases.”

Chase swallowed his food. “Look, I have no problem being portrayed fully as a cat, but *Mad Hatter* here got it off easy. How the story portrays him is nothing like how he is in real life.”

Malcolm’s eyes darkened. “Watch what you are saying. You know nothing.”

Chase let out a laugh. “Yeah right, I saw you out there in the Dark Forest, and my eyes don’t deceive me.”

“Chase,” Melvin spoke up. “Shut up. Now. That was a long time ago. You know as well as I that times have changed.”

“Right.” Chase stood up. “Now he’s as pure as the driven snow. I can’t stand being around him anymore.” He grabbed his plate of food. “I’ll be eating on the roof if anyone needs me.”

Howard didn’t say anything as Chase stormed out and left us sitting there. I didn’t know what to do or say, I wanted to go after him, but it sounded like he wanted to be alone. Davis had a worried look on his face as he glanced at Melvin.

“Good riddance,” Malcolm said as he took a sip of his tea. “Now we don’t have to deal with that feline.”



The rest of dinner was rather silent and I ate my food awkwardly, wondering if Chase was going to come back. He didn’t.

Malcolm escorted me back to my room and I thanked him for a delicious meal. He left me with a candle, as apparently old castles like this didn’t have electricity, and I went into my room for the night, leaving out Davis’ old clothes.

I found some clothes I could use as pajamas and quickly changed into them. I sat down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. I was tired but my mind was racing. Everything that had just happened started to run through my mind. My heart started to beat quickly, as a panic attack began to form.

What if I couldn't leave this place? What if I got stuck here? My family and my friends wouldn't know what happened, they would be worried sick. How much time had passed since I had left the real world? Would they know I was gone? Supposedly no time had passed for the real Alice, in the stories at least, but that was just a story. It could have been wrong, lots of time could have passed. Everyone would be so worried.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. What was I doing? Why did I willingly go with these guys? Why were they so interested in me? What was I supposed to do?

There was so much going through my mind, all of it racing through my mind due to the fact it was my first moment alone since coming to Wonderland. I no longer could rely on any of them to keep me sane; I would have to find some means to preoccupy my mind from unleashing all these anxious thoughts.

But now they weren't, now they wanted answers, answers that probably wouldn't be given until it was all over. Meanwhile, I had to deal with it all. It wasn't fair, I had to be honest with myself—I was scared.

As I laid there in the dark silence, I realized I was really thirsty. I should have gotten some water before I went to sleep. I sighed, realizing if I did want some water, I should change back into the dress instead of the nightgown I found myself in.

Well, it couldn't be helped.

I got back up and quickly changed. It was dark out but the windows let in some of the light of the moon. I opened the door a crack and glanced in the hallway. There was no one around. I hoped I wasn't disobeying any rules by going out into the castle by myself, but I knew I would be quick so it would be fine.

Heading down the stairs where I figured the kitchen would be, I moved past the room where I had met Howard. The door was ajar and I could hear voices. Curiosity got the better of me, as I heard my name. Were they talking about me? And if they were, what were they saying?

"She doesn't understand what's going on, Howard, Morpheus is going to kill her," Melvin said.

"Give her time, she will come to understand how to beat Morpheus," Howard explained.

“Melvin is right, a lot is at stake. Are you sure she is the right girl?” Malcolm said. It kind of hurt, as he was the one that seemed to have faith in me. Did he really not think I was the right Alice?

“Have faith, she is the correct Alice. Do you remember when the original Alice came? She was a little girl and she took down the Kingdom of Hearts. This girl can do it, I have faith in her,” Howard tried calming them down. I took a deep breath. They were putting a lot of weight on my shoulders and I wasn’t sure if I could handle it. I wasn’t the original Alice, I was just a girl from a small city that honestly had nothing going for her except always having a smile on her face. A smile that hid away the pain and worry of the future.

“We almost got caught in the forest on our way here. Bill followed us,” Malcolm explained.

“They knew she was in Wonderland. The White Rabbit was in the real world and tried to kill her. They know about her and are going to retaliate,” Chase added.

The room became silent and I held my breath as I listened closely.

“Then we will have to act fast. I would like you boys to go out to the Cirque de Rêves tomorrow. I want you to see if anything has changed there,” Howard ordered.

“Yes sir,” the boys said.

I heard them start to move and I hurried towards the doors to the balcony outside. I didn’t want them to know I was listening in and it was the closest place to hide.

The balcony stood above the once grand Red and White Kingdom. It was beautiful to behold, the ruins that were left glittered in the moonlight. Trees that appeared to be maples, if maples existed in this place, danced in the wind, adding to the scenery. I couldn’t help but standing there in awe.

I heard the door to the balcony open and I cringed. Did they notice me listening? Or did they just see me outside?

“What are you still doing up? I thought you went to bed.”

I turned to find Chase behind me. I smiled innocently. “I got thirsty and came down for some water.”

“Ah, I see.” Chase stepped up next to me at the railing. “You weren’t just coming downstairs to listen to our conversation?”

I froze. I didn't know what to say, I didn't make a habit of listening to other people's conversation yet I kept finding myself listening in to theirs.

"Don't worry, the others don't know. Only I could hear you." He pointed at his ears. "These always come in handy. Though Melvin should have heard too, but I swear he is as deaf as an old granny."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." I began.

He shook his head. "I don't care if you heard us, there isn't any information you should be kept from. We brought you here without explaining everything, hoping you can solve our problems. Nothing should be kept secret."

"You all don't think I can do it, huh?" I said.

Chase grinned. "There is some worry, yes. But I trust you Alice, I think you can do anything."

I shook my head. "No, the others are right, I don't understand what is going on, I'm not going to be able to go against this Morpheus. Hell, I don't even know what I am supposed to do. Am I supposed to just fight him? Like with swords or fists? If that is the case, I am way too weak and I have no idea how to even hold a sword."

"Well, we'll fix that. Starting tomorrow morning, we shall teach you everything you need to know. Hand-to-hand fighting, swords, knives, guns, you name it! We will teach it to you."

My eyes widened. "Really? That would be amazing!"

"But first you need to rest. You haven't slept for a while and if you want to learn how to fight right, you need all your strength."

Sleep. That was a good one. In a place like this, after everything that had happened, I wasn't sure I could sleep ever again. "I tried that, but I couldn't fall asleep. There is just too much going on."

"You don't need to worry about things, Alice, live in the moment." Chase pulled me towards the stairs. "Come, I'll take you somewhere you can get your mind off everything."

I looked back at the castle. "Uh... Are you sure the others won't mind?"

"Meh, who cares? They are all stuck up anyways. It will be amazing, I promise." He looked at me with those sad cat-like eyes. "Please?"

I stared at him a bit longer, laughing a bit in my mind but at the same time feeling a little pitiful. He reminded me of Puss in Boots on the movie *Shrek*. "Fine, where are we going?"

His ears perked up. "Come right this way!"

It was dark and the stars simply glittered in the sky with the moon. Moons, actually, there were two. It was weird seeing different constellations and more than one moon in the sky. Pretty but strange. Chase led me further into the White Kingdom's section of the area. There was no one around, it was really just the five of them living there, no other people from Wonderland were here any longer. I wondered how they could hide away in this place for such a long time.

A lot of the kingdom was covered in wilderness now, moss and vines covering the buildings. Trees grew through the concrete, not letting man-made objects blocking the path of nature. We came to one of the larger trees and Chase stopped.

"Hold on tight, Alice," he pulled me close and suddenly we were up on one of the higher branches.

I almost screamed.

"Don't worry, you are fine with me. You need to not worry about heights if you are going to be here."

I glanced around to find a small treehouse in front of me.

"Are heights a regular thing with you all?"

"Well, mostly me. I like heights and if you are going to hang out with me, you are going to have to get used to it." He smiled brightly as he gestured around. "This is where I live."

To have called it a tree house may have been a bit much. It really was just a flat board. A large flat board, but seriously that was it. No walls, no ceiling. Just a floor and some padding.

"You sleep here?" I asked. It seemed strange, to be sleeping outside instead of in the castle. But I guess he was a cat.

He nodded. "Yup! Cats like heights."

"And you thought this would help me relax? I don't like heights as you already know."

"No." He picked up a rock. "I brought you up here to see this." He threw the rock into the forest.

As the rock hit the forest floor, hundreds, if not, thousands of lights came shooting up into the sky around us. I watched them in awe. There were so many of them. They looked like fireflies but something told me in my mind that they weren't. They flew more like butterflies. They spread

across the sky, twinkling and changed color. I couldn't believe it, all I wanted to do now was paint what I had seen. As they rose in the sky, they looked like the northern lights, twinkling different colors. I could spend hours staring at them.

"This is amazing!" I exclaimed. "I've never seen something so beautiful."

"Wonderland is full of beauty and mystery. That's why I love it here, I always can find something new to explore." Chase sat down and leaned back on his arms. "I could never settle down in one place with so many things to explore."

I went over and sat down next to him. "My world must seem so boring to you."

He laughed. "It is pretty dull, I have to admit." He glanced over to me. "But there are some great things about it."

I blushed as I looked back up at the sky. The lights still sparkled in the night sky. I leaned back on my arms and closed my eyes for a second. I didn't realize how tired I was and before I knew it, I was out.

CHAPTER 12

I woke up to find clear sky above me. I blinked a couple of times, wondering how that was possible. Then it hit me. I was in a tree, way up in a tree actually. Chase had brought me up here last night where I could sleep.

That's right, I was in Wonderland.

So this isn't a dream. I'm trapped in Wonderland.

It hit me like a wall, I couldn't believe it. Deep down I really thought it was a dream, but I should have woken up by now. I should have found myself covered in paint in my room. Instead, I found myself in a tree, by myself, with Chase nowhere to be seen.

Great.

I peered down at the ground. I had to have been at least five stories up. God, if Chase left me up here I was going to punch him. I hated heights, especially ones where I knew there was no way I could get down without him transporting me down. He was such a jerk if he left me.

After the anger started to dissipate, I realized how much I could really see of the Kingdoms. Although I had walked through the ruins yesterday, it was much different seeing them in the day like this. I could see how grand it really once stood, how many people it could occupy. It was extraordinary to see, as time and nature currently trying to take it back to a time before it was created, trees and plants swallowing it whole, slowly but surely. I imagined parts of the Greek and Roman Empire looked quite the same. History that would slowly be forgotten.

"Chase, where the hell did you go?" I whispered as I tried to figure out how to get down from here. Nope, there was no clear way of doing it. I was screwed.

"You didn't think I would really leave you here alone, now did ya?"

I looked up to find Chase on a branch higher up than the board. I don't know why I didn't think to look up, he was a cat after all.

"Who knows with you," I commented

He grinned as he jumped down to the platform. "You learn quickly."

I looked back down at the ground below. It seemed quiet, but I knew Malcolm and the others were down there. "Shouldn't we be getting down

there now? You said something about learning how to fight today.”

“As you wish.” He wrapped his arms around me and suddenly we were on the ground. He kept his arms around me, smiling. My heart started to beat faster. His skin was warm against mine and I could feel his hot breath against my face. He started to lean closer...

“Chase!” I heard Malcolm’s voice call from behind me. Chase let go of me and I turned to find Malcolm running over towards us. “You have some nerve, you stupid cat!”

Chase raised his eyebrow with a sly smile. “What are you talking about?”

“I went to wake up Alice and she was gone. You didn’t tell *any* of us where you took her. What do you think that was like, especially since there are people out there who are trying to get her? For all we knew, she could have been kidnapped. But lo and behold, you were missing as well.” Malcolm had his hands clenched in fists and his face was starting to turn red. I stepped away from the two of them.

Chase shrugged it off, not letting Malcolm talk down at him. “She couldn’t sleep so I decided to take her up to my tree fort to see the wonders of this land.”

Malcolm looked up in disbelief. “You took her up there? How could you?”

“Easily, I’m a cat. Now, stop yelling at me or are you just jealous that she spent the night with me instead of you?”

Malcolm pulled his fist back and punched Chase right in the jaw.

“Chase!” I exclaimed as he fell back. I knelt down next to him, making sure he was all right.

Chase placed his fingers over where his lip was bleeding. “That was uncalled for.”

“No it wasn’t,” Malcolm sharply replied. He held out his hand. “Now let’s go Alice, there’s a lot we need to go over today. You don’t want to spend your time with this cat.”

I looked down at Chase who was licking the blood off his finger. I didn’t understand why Malcolm was so mad at Chase, he was just trying to help. Though, then again, he should have told someone where we were, but I was responsible for that as well. I sighed as I grabbed Malcolm’s hand and he helped me up.

Malcolm led us back towards the castle where I could change into something more practical to learn how to fight in. I spotted an ivory and brown corset with a blue shirt, brown pants, and a utility belt that would be perfect to wear.

I glanced behind us to find Chase following at a distance, scowling. I felt bad for him and didn't know what to do. The more time I spent with either of them, the more they fought. I liked them both and wanted both to be my friends. It was a lot more complicated than I even realized, especially if they had existed for such a long time.

"Why are you so mad at him?" I finally asked Malcolm. I would have whispered so Chase couldn't overhear, but I remembered he was a cat and could hear pretty much anything.

"Because, he knew better than to take you away from the base. If Bill attacked here, he would have been defenseless. We have to stick together in case someone finds us," he explained, keeping his eyes forward.

"But would they have been able to get up there, on the tree I mean. We were pretty high up."

"When Chase opens portals like that, they stay around for a while. Bill has a device that can allow him to go through. That is why we didn't use his abilities in the forest. If Bill figured out you were up there, you would have been cornered and everything that we worked hard to accomplish would have been for nothing."

I looked down at my feet. "Oh, I didn't know."

"You aren't the one at fault, Chase is. He should have known better, or at least told one of us."

"He was just trying to help me, I couldn't sleep last night. Too much going through my mind."

Malcolm looked over to me. "I know this is a lot to take in, Alice, but I think with our help, you can overcome anything." He nodded over to the other boys. "We will train you in everything you need to know."

He led me to them, and they smiled when they saw me.

"Ready for a fun day of fighting, Alice?" Melvin smiled.

"If it will help me defeat Morpheus, then sure?" I had a feeling, though, it wouldn't help. But I was open to anything.

Melvin and Davis looked over at Chase and frowned. They didn't say a word but I knew they were as mad at him as much as Malcolm was. Chase

was silent as he approached.

I quickly changed into the outfit I had spotted earlier and came back down for breakfast. Chase simply lingered in the shadows, watching, making sure I was all right, but not saying a word to any of the others, his ears down and a bit ashamed. He acted like a cat who got caught perching on the dining room table on Thanksgiving. It was sad to watch, but almost a little comical.

Once breakfast was over, the four boys took me to a large room that was full of weapons of all sorts. I gasped in amazement. It appeared like something that would be found in an English palace.

“To start off, we will work on hand-to-hand combat.” Malcolm gestured to sit. “Melvin and I will demonstrate some fighting and then teach you a move and you will try it with Davis.”

“Why me?” Davis squeaked.

Malcolm smiled. “Because you are the smallest and best for her to practice with.”

Melvin and Malcolm went out to the middle of the room. Bowing, they raised their hands. Right away, I could tell that Melvin and Malcolm had two different styles of fighting. Malcolm held his hands up, but with fingers in, sort of like a tiger style that I had seen online, whereas Melvin had his fingers up and extended.

Melvin was the first to move. It all happened really fast, I tried to keep up with how they were fighting, but it was rather difficult. When Melvin first struck, Malcolm blocked the attack with his left arm and then counterattacked with his right hand, slashing Melvin straight in the face. It was clear they weren’t giving it their all, as Melvin had barely been hit. If it was full throttle, Melvin would have been on the ground.

Even though he took the hit, Melvin was quick to recover. He swung his leg out towards Malcolm, bouncing back on his arm, knocking Malcolm’s legs from underneath him. Although I would have definitely have fallen face-first on the ground, Malcolm landed on his arms and tumbled back up to a standing position. The fight was clearly nowhere near over.

Malcolm took a punch at Melvin that was easily deflected and punched Malcolm in the stomach. As Melvin was just about to hit him again, Malcolm grabbed his arm and pulled him towards himself, stepping out of

the way and kicking him down to the ground. Malcolm knelt down as if he were going to punch Melvin in the face, but he stopped short.

“You get the idea, right?”

I nodded, eyes wide. They were pretty good, as it was just a demonstration. I wondered how good they were when they weren’t holding back.

Malcolm motioned Davis and I to stand up. “Now, you two come here. We will show you the first move and how to deflect it.”

I stood across from Davis, worried that whatever would happen wouldn’t cause Davis any pain. He looked as worried as I did, as if he has been in this situation before.

“Now Davis, act as if you are punching straight at Alice’s face, and do it slowly,” Malcolm said as he stood behind me.

Davis’ fist came slowly at my face.

“Now, use your left arm to deflect it, and once it is deflected, use that momentum to punch him across the face. Don’t actually do it, but get the movement down in your muscle memory.”

I nodded and did just that.

“Very good!” Malcolm said. “Now when he punched with his left hand, grab his wrist with your left hand and punch his elbow with the palm of your hand. Then with both hands grab his arm, pull him forward, and kick him in the knee.”

“You suck as a teacher, you know that? She isn’t going to get anywhere with a teacher like you,” Chase said, as he still stood in the corner watching and ready to mock anything he could.

Malcolm turned and frowned. “Really, you want to do this now?”

Chase shrugged. “Just telling you my observations. You aren’t that great of a fighter, I could beat you any day of the week.”

“This again. You are just mad that I beat you last time.”

“Oh, yeah, how about a rematch?” Chase stepped forward. “And show Alice here what a real fight looks like, not this choreographed nonsense. You and me, one on one. No weapons, just fists.”

Malcolm sighed, then nodded for us to move. “Fine, but don’t complain to me when you have to crawl up a tree and lick your wounds clean.”

I quickly moved out of the way, along with Davis and Melvin. Both of them frowned.

“Not this again,” Melvin whispered. “What is he thinking?”

I didn’t know which of the two he meant. Malcolm and Chase bowed and raised their hands. However, instead of a tiger-like technique or an open hand, Chase raised his hands like a boxer would.

“He is completely different than both of you,” I commented.

Davis nodded. “Good eye. Neither of them ever agree on anything, even fighting techniques. That is where things gets really interesting. Sorry you have to watch, but when Chase said no holding back, he wasn’t joking. When these two have an excuse to physically fight, neither of them will stop until the other is down and out.”

I stared at them, a bit afraid as to what was going to happen. I didn’t want either of them to get hurt. I knew how much they hated each other, and they used these matches to really lay into the other. I wondered how long I could watch.

Chase went straight towards Malcolm, his elbows close to himself, punching towards his torso. Malcolm blocked them all and tried to rebut with his own technique, but Chase blocked him as well. Then Chase laid one right onto Malcolm’s jaw.

I put my hands over my mouth as Malcolm wiped away the blood on mouth. “Good one.”

And with that he punched Chase right into the jaw as well. Chase stumbled back for a moment, then charged back at him with another punch. Malcolm easily deflected it and kicked him in the side. Chase blocked the second kick, adding a few more punches of his own. One landed straight into Malcolm’s stomach but he didn’t let it phase him. Quickly he punched back, making Chase turn his back to him to block. Malcolm had the upper advantage for a moment, but Chase quickly got out of it.

“Oh my god, when are they going to stop?” I whispered more to myself than to Davis or Melvin. Neither of them were slowing down and the more they fought, the more they appeared angrier.

Chase took a large swing at Malcolm, which Malcolm easily dodged and kicked Chase straight in the face in retaliation. I watched as blood started to run down his face next to his eye. God, I couldn’t stomach watching anymore, but my eyes couldn’t look away for even a second.

Malcolm charged at him, round kicking twice at his face, but Chase dodged both of them and punched him straight in the face. Chase kept

punching but Malcolm held off each attack and punched him in the nose. He started to fall back but Malcolm grabbed him and pulled him into a full Nelson. Chase was helpless.

“When are you going to realize you can’t beat me, cat?” Malcolm yelled. “Stop being a selfish bastard and realize you are nothing! Just a pain in my ass.”

“Why should I ever take orders from you, you’re an outcast! A criminal! You should have never been allowed back into Wonderland. Alice should have never accepted you, she was stupid to think you could ever change!” Chase kept struggling in Malcolm’s grip, but couldn’t do anything about it. I wondered if they meant the original Alice, the Alice of legend.

“That is none of your business!”

“Boys, enough!” Howard stepped in the room. “Really, I leave you alone for ten minutes and I come back to this. How is Alice supposed to learn if you can’t hold it together for a few minutes?”

Malcolm let go of Chase and Chase dusted himself off. They both answered. “Sorry, sir.”

“Chase,” Howard sighed. “I want you to teach Alice how to use a sword. You are the best one to teach here.”

He nodded. “Sure.”

“Well then,” Howard gestured to the swords. “Go ahead.”

Howard stared at Chase, scowling at him as he went to get the swords.

“Come on Alice, we will practice over here,” Chase said.

Chase started showing the different type of swords there were and what each one was best at when it came to fighting. “There are many types of swords, as you can see. I will give you a quick overview before we decide which one we should practice with.

“First off, you have your longswords and bastard swords, which are the typical medieval looking swords. These can either be one or two hands, though with the heavier ones I think they need two hands. It really just depends on the handle. They are usually double-edged.” He moved on to the next swords.

“For one-handed swords, we have broadswords which include claymores. Then there are long knives which are always good to have handy in case something happens to your main sword.

“Next we have the edgeless and thrusting swords, such as the xiphos, rapier, and panzerstecher, which are more for agility, finding your opponent’s weak spot when it comes to armor and aiming there. Then there is the single-edged and curved swords, which include katanas, sabers, and cutlasses. Any questions?”

I had a lot of questions, actually. I knew nothing about swords and suddenly was thrust in having to choose one of them. But there was one thing I wanted to know. “What would be the best to fight against Morpheus with?” I asked.

Chase scratched his chin. “Really depends on what he has. It’s not like I have seen him fight with a sword. As for the King and Queen’s guards, they fight with rapiers, which have more precision when dealing with armor. With Morpheus, you don’t need to worry about that. You also won’t be able to learn to be that precise and quick. As for double-sided, two-handed swords, I think they might be too heavy and slow you down. So really for you I would pick either a claymore or any of the single-edged swords.”

I glanced back at the rest of the boys and Howard. They were all talking, and Malcolm seemed to be arguing about something, but Howard wouldn’t have it. The tension was growing thick in the room.

Turning my attention back to the swords, I studied them all. I did agree that I would want to start out with something light at first and there was one that stood out to me above all the rest. I grabbed the katana.

“Should have figured. All right.” Chase grabbed the other katana. “Let’s start our lesson.”

We went out into the middle of the room and I pulled off the sheath and started to hold it by the handle.

Chase shook his head. “No, no, you can’t hold your hands together or you won’t be able to get enough power. Realize that the only part that really does the task of striking your victim is the last two inches so you have to be able to torque it as much as possible. You have one hand on the very top of the handle and at the end you have your other hand relaxed and controlling it.”

He moved my hands to where he said they needed to be. It felt a lot more comfortable and I started to understand how it affected my swinging.

“Great, that’s it. Now block my sword as I swing slowly.”

He swung his sword down slowly and I blocked it. He swung at the side and I blocked it. It was fun but I knew that this was never how a battle would play out, with slow swings. A battle would be fast but this was how I was to learn.

“Now move your feet with the sword. Keep a defensive pose. That’s it!” Chase started swinging a little faster.

“Great, but with a katana you block a little different. Here, like this.” He motioned the sword at a downward angle. “That way it protects your whole body. Stepping back will also help.”

I tried doing what he said and moved my feet with the sword, but I kept messing up and leaving myself unbalanced. Chase struck again and I lost my balance and fell backwards.

Chase helped me back up. “You have to keep your balance.”

“I know, it’s hard to think about all these things at once,” I sighed.

Chase tapped his chin for a second. “Think of it like this, it’s a dance. A beautiful dance with sharp pointy props. Let the rhythm flow through you smoothly. Just imagine the music is everything around you and all that matters is getting the moves down and not letting your sword drop nor the other sword touch you.”

I thought about it for a moment. “All right, I’ll try it that way.”

Chase swung at me again and I recoiled. I didn’t lose my balance this time, I let the rhythm of the katana guide me. Chase struck again and again and I blocked each one without a problem. He sped up his attack and I kept up with him. Soon we were fighting at normal speed and the others just watched, surprised that Chase could teach me so fast.

Chase swung once more, but instead of blocking, I jumped to the side and knocked the sword out of his hand. He laughed.

“Perfect Alice! You got it!”

I smiled and bowed as if I just finished a dance. The boys clapped and Howard looked very satisfied.

Chase turned to Malcolm. “She should probably go back to learn how to fight hand-to-hand. She’s all yours now. Besides, I need to take a break.”

With that, Chase left me there to train with the others.

CHAPTER 13

After a couple of hours training, Malcolm let me take a lunch break. Howard had already made sandwiches, and somehow knew my favorite sandwich: a grilled cheese. The others finished theirs quickly and went back to the room to train. I took the rest of my grilled cheese and watched them.

To outsiders, they all probably looked like some kids just goofing off, but I knew better now. They were older than they appeared, a lot older, training like they usually did. Malcolm used to serve under the Queen and King of Dreams. I couldn't believe it at first but now that I watched him, I could see how he held his head in authority. He was a born leader, at least he appeared that way to me. The others respected him and followed what he said. Except for Chase.

Chase didn't seem to belong, I could tell. He looked like an outsider, trying to fit in. I wondered what caused him to join this group to fight, especially with his hatred of Malcolm. He was definitely a loner, going from one place to another just like in the story. Did he just see Morpheus as a threat and decide to help the rest of them defeat him? But if that was the case, what had happened between Malcolm and Chase that made their feud so great? Was it so bad that they couldn't stop fighting for five seconds?

"Interesting lot of characters, huh?"

I turned to find Howard next to me. He leaned against the wall and looked out at them. Chase was still nowhere to be seen. I figured he must have gone back to his treehouse to be away from the rest of them.

I nodded. "Yeah, they are."

"They all have different backgrounds, both good and bad. It's interesting that they are the only ones not affected by Morpheus. Then again, I can understand why, especially once you know them. Their fears were conquered long ago."

"Are they the only ones in this entire world that aren't affected?" I asked, wondering how it seemed such a small number. The odds of defeating Morpheus seemed greater than ever.

He nodded. "Yes."

I looked back over at them. "Why is that exactly?"

Howard shrugged. "It was probably just because of all the things they have been through together. Chase doesn't let fear affect him since he spends his time alone. Melvin has been through many wars and has already faced his fears more than once. Davis, even though he seems to be small and afraid, is really strong-minded. And Malcolm..." he stopped in mid-sentence.

"What about him?"

He sighed. "Malcolm has been through more than any of us can imagine. Morpheus can't make him afraid because he has so much darkness inside of him already. It was said that the Queen of Hearts banished him to the Dark Forest. He used to be a trouble maker and is lucky to still have his head. He was all alone in that forest for years."

"What exactly happened?" I asked, curious as to what their stories were, especially Malcolm. He was nice enough, that I could tell, but in his eyes it is apparent that there used to be some kind of darkness.

"Alice came, the original Alice, and she found him in those woods. She did or said something that persuaded him to come out of the forest and help her fight the Queen. None of us could believe it, really, that boy never ever listened to anyone. He was much like Chase in that he would only joke with people, but on a much larger scale and was wanted for many, many crimes. But nevertheless, Alice spoke to him and he listened and with his help she was able to take down the Queen. All seemed to be restored for Malcolm."

"But then Alice left and he changed again, this time he was darker and colder than ever before. Whatever happened to the happy joker was lost in the Dark Forest forever. He became violent and after a while, and a few more crimes, he went back into exile in the forest. But as the story went, Alice came back. She found out what happened and she went back for him, even though we all thought he was a lost cause. It took a while, but he finally came to and tried to talk the Red and White Kingdom into signing a peace treaty. It didn't work and they ended up destroying each other."

"Then Alice left him again. They were very close at this point but instead of going back into the forest, he stayed sane. So when the Kingdom of Dreams came, Melvin, who had served with him, recommended him to the King and Queen and he became their first general."

"So there is a lot of dark secrets in Malcolm's past?"

He nodded. "Yes, and there is a lot that none of us know. We don't know what happened in the Dark Forest, what he was up to. You have to be very strong to survive as long as he did in that forest. But all in all, I haven't seen him this happy in a very long time. He trusts you Alice, you should know that."

I shook my head. "No, they all have their doubts about me."

"I have a feeling after this morning they have more faith in you. You did well, especially with that katana."

"Oh, thanks. It was really Chase that did well, he explained everything in a way that I could understand," I turned to him. "Why does no one seem to trust Chase?"

He laughed. "No one really has trusted the Cheshire Cat in the stories. I guess it has to do with him not having any loyalties through the wars. He leads people in all different directions, coming and going as he pleases."

"Why is he helping now? If he has no loyalties, I mean."

"This war is different. This war affects everyone and everything. No one is their self anymore, becoming slaves to Morpheus. I guess Chase just couldn't stand not being able to play tricks on anyone any longer."

For some reason I couldn't believe that was the only thing. Sure Chase liked playing tricks on people, but there had to be more to it than that. There was so much more to him, at least that's what it seemed to me. "So that is why Malcolm doesn't trust him? Because he has no loyalty?"

"I think, in the end, Malcolm trusts him to do what is right. They are the only ones left and Chase can help them get in and out of places. He's the only one other than the White Rabbit who can travel to your world."

"Malcolm was pretty mad at him this morning," I said.

"Chase should have known better, but I know he was just trying to make you feel better. Malcolm will get over it. If he was truly mad, you would know."

"What do you mean?"

Howard smiled. "Let's just hope it won't come to that. Now, you should get back in there and practice. And don't mention this conversation to them, I don't think they would appreciate me talking about their pasts to you."

"Oh, I didn't mean to pry," I began.

He shook his head. "Don't worry, you should know who you are fighting with. That way you better understand what is going on."

“What about you then? Why are you in the middle of all this?”

He laughed. “That’s a long story for another time. Now get going, they are waiting for you.”

I nodded then turned to head down the balcony stairs. Now I was getting even more curiouser and curiouser about it all, especially when it came to Malcolm and Chase.

CHAPTER 14

We worked on fighting skills for the rest of the day. The sun began to set in the distance and Malcolm decided to call it a day. Dinner wasn't as extravagant as it had been the night before, but that was fine since I wanted to take a bath and clean up, as I hadn't been able to for a while.

I was very surprised and thankful to find that the castle did indeed have plumbing. I drew myself a bath and was able to soak in the warm water for a good amount of time. I was pretty happy they had warm water as well. The castle was huge so I didn't have to worry about anyone waiting for this bath since they could go somewhere else. It felt really good on my muscles, as they were sore from fighting all day.

What I enjoyed most about the day was being able to learn how to use a katana. Chase was an excellent teacher, contrary to what Malcolm thought. I enjoyed being around Chase, as he was able to let loose and he made it his priority to let me know exactly what was happening, though I did think sometimes he could inform his own team more on what was going on.

I thought about Chase for a bit. He did finally show up at dinner, silent, still not talking to anyone, his ears twitching when others whispered about him. I felt bad but I had no idea what to do about it. I didn't want to get in the middle of a feud that didn't seem to have any end, nor did I understand.

After what felt like an hour passed as I sat in the tub, letting time pass and letting my thoughts unwind. I had accepted the fact that I was now in Wonderland and needed to find a way out of here. If the White Rabbit and Chase were the only ones who could make portals, that would really mean that I had to bring down the White Rabbit in order to go home, didn't it? That meant that no one could come after me once I went home.

No, I couldn't leave this place knowing what I knew—knowing that if I didn't stop Morpheus, then the whole world as I knew it would have their dreams destroyed and be living in a horrible mess. No, I couldn't allow that, I couldn't just turn my head and look away.

I never considered myself strong—far from it. But with everything going on, I felt as if I was growing, as if I could do anything. I had learned to fight pretty well today, both by hand and with a katana. I still didn't

understand why I was the one selected, but at least now I believed I could put up some sort of fight.

Getting out of the tub, I dried off my body and hair with a towel. Granted, it was a pretty old towel, but it seemed clean enough. As I tried to get the last of the water out of my hair, I heard a knock at the door to my room.

Quickly, afraid that whoever it was would barge in, I put on a robe and went to answer the door. It was Chase.

He blushed as he saw me in the robe. "Oh." He turned away. "I didn't mean to intrude."

I shook my head. "No, it's fine. Come in."

I moved over to the couch that occupied the front part of the room and sat down, making sure my legs were covered as much as they could be with the robe. He stayed standing, trying not to look at me.

"I just wanted to tell you that we are leaving for the Cirque de Rêves tonight. The others didn't want to tell you but I thought you should know, in case something happens."

That didn't make sense to me, with everything that was going on, why wouldn't they just stay away from the Circus until it was time to fight. "Why are you going?"

"To check their status. Morpheus knows you are here and we need to figure out what their next move is." He scratched the back of his head. "No one thinks you are ready to meet him but I think you should see what you are facing."

"You think I should come?" I asked. I didn't particularly want to meet the man, as he could control someone's fear. I had no idea what to think.

He shrugged. "If you think you aren't ready, then no you shouldn't go. But it's really up to you, I just think you should have the option of going or not."

I looked down and fiddled with my hands. It was a lot to think about in such a short amount of time. I had just gotten here, learned all about the world, how to fight, but I was far from facing the truth of the matter, facing who I needed to defeat.

"You don't have to decide now, we aren't going to leave for another hour. I will make the portal just outside the gate of the kingdom. If you are

in time, you can still jump through it without me.” He started for the door. “I should get back to the others before they know I am here.”

I quickly stood up. “Thank you, for telling me all of this. I really appreciate it.”

He nodded and left me there. I stared at the closed door for a moment longer, then looked over to the clothes that lay on the ground from that day.

No, I shouldn’t go, I wasn’t ready. It would be a lot to handle, and I could fail miserably.

But I wanted to know what I was facing.

I quickly changed into some clothes and hurried out the door.



I headed towards where Chase said he would make the portal. It was quiet out, as it usually was, but more eerie since I was alone. I hadn’t truly been alone since I was here, and not outside. It was a strange thought to realize, as in the real world I had been so used to being alone. Here, I wasn’t even able to sit down long enough to gather my thoughts. I didn’t know if I should be doing this but Chase was right, I should see what I would have to face. Then maybe I could prepare.

As I came to the entrance to the kingdom, I saw four figures just beyond the gate. Quickly, I hid and watched as Chase created the portal. Each of them stepped through it and after they disappeared, I ran and jumped through it before it closed.

It felt like a jolt of electricity running through my body. It was different than the portal that lead between worlds, it wasn’t a feeling of falling like that. No, this felt a lot different, as if disobeying the laws of physics. As if it was something that should have never been done. It was over in an instant but my heart kept racing. Freaky.

I peered around at my new surroundings and I gasped. Giant Circus tents stood before me, I had never seen something so fantastic. The striped colors ranged from red to purple, swirling in a majestic rainbow. In addition to this, performers crowded outside the tents, juggling, dancing, eating fire, and even balancing knives. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Yet, this is the evil causing all the darkness?

Crowds of people hurried towards the entrance of the tent. I noticed how they all had the same darkness clouding their face, just like the people

I met earlier. Something here was indeed causing it and even so, people still wanted to participate.

I caught a glimpse of Malcolm and the others ahead of me. Even though I knew they would be mad at me for coming, I knew it wouldn't be smart to separate from them. I just hoped they would forgive me.

As I hurried towards them, I notice that they had stopped in front of a man and as soon I was close enough, I felt something strange, something dark, something almost like...

Fear.

Could he be Morpheus? I shuddered at the thought, but there was this lingering feeling in the air, the same one I got before an exam or before a performance. It was definitely the escalating feeling of fear.

The man was average height, with a two-tailed suit and changing color bow tie. White gloves covered his hands and he held a black cane in his right hand. He also had on a black top hat covered in rainbow flowers that covered part of his brown hair. He looked like a ring master and that's when I knew, he had to be Morpheus.

"Well, well, it looks like you have a tagalong." Morpheus grinned as he saw me. Malcolm and the others turned around to find me standing behind them. I froze, wanting to run away. I should have stayed in the kingdom. This was a big mistake. I wasn't ready for this, it was a really stupid idea.

"How did you get here?" Malcolm looked more afraid than I had ever seen anyone be. He looked as if all hope had been lost, as if I had done the worst thing imaginable

The words escaped my mouth and I couldn't answer him. I didn't know what to say, I realized I had just made the worse decision that could cost everyone everything. "I..."

"I told her we were going," Chase explained to him.

Malcolm scowled at him. "How dare you go against my orders." He looked as if he was going to hit him, but held it back. I was glad, though, I didn't want to see another fist fight break out.

Morpheus laughed. "Seems you have a bit of a problem on your hands, Mad Hatter."

"My name is Malcolm," his voice was dark, sending shivers down my spine.

“But you were far more interesting as the Mad Hatter. Oh well, if you don’t want to take a trip into the past.” He tapped his cane on the ground. “Maybe Alice would like to know.”

Melvin and Davis stood in front of me.

“Oh, what do we have here? Two boys who think they can take on the God of Nightmares? How amusing.”

“You aren’t taking her, Morpheus,” Malcolm said.

He grinned widely, as if this was a game. “Oh, but I am! Haven’t you learned anything? I always get what I want.”

Malcolm pulled out his sword. It was a rapier, not a katana like I trained with. I felt against my side. My katana was awaiting my command. Was this the time to use it? Was I ready?

Malcolm pointed his sword at Morpheus. “You aren’t taking her. Not this time.”

“Oh ho! Brave little protector you are! Interesting given what you did to the last Alice.”

Malcolm shook his head. “Your words won’t distract me like they do others. Stop wasting your time.”

He laughed as he pulled a sword out of his cane. It was also a rapier, dull on the sides and only pointed at the end. “Fine, I will just kill you now and be done with this game!”

Morpheus leapt forward and the clash of their rapiers rasped as they hit each other. Again and again Morpheus struck at Malcolm and again and again Malcolm defended himself. Morpheus may have been fast in my eyes, but Malcolm was a lot faster. The sound was loud as they thrashed back and forth. Morpheus tried to lunge at Malcolm, but it was no use. Malcolm was indeed skilled in fighting with a rapier.

Melvin, Davis and Chase stayed by me, making sure I was protected in case Morpheus tried anything dirty. I wondered if I should pull out my katana and help, but I felt as if I would be of no help. They were on a whole different level of expertise than me. The others looked as if they wanted to help as well, but they stayed at my side, knowing Malcolm would be mad if they did otherwise.

A crowd started to gather around, watching as the two swordsmen battled it out. Neither of them were holding anything back and any second,

one of them could strike a killing blow. It was like *Princess Bride*, with Wesley and Inigo fighting on top of the cliff. I couldn't believe my eyes.

Then something happened. Malcolm lost his footing and Morpheus thrust his sword right into his shoulder. Malcolm fell back onto the ground, grabbing his wounded shoulder. Morpheus quickly stepped on his hand and kicked the sword away.

"Good bye, dear Hatter. You will be missed." Morpheus pulled back his sword to give the killing thrust.

My heart was racing, and without thinking, I pulled out my katana and hurried to Malcolm. I pulled it up and blocked Morpheus' sword, breathing heavily as I did so.

He let out a laugh. "Oh, miss Alice, do you really think you can defeat me? With a katana, no less."

I shook my head. "No, I don't think I can defeat you, but I'm not going to let you hurt my friends." Taking a deep breath, I realized there was only one way to help them. "I will go with you, but you have to promise not to hurt any of them."

Morpheus smiled. "Well, well, what do we have here? I guess you won the heart of this Alice as well, Hatter. How times have changed." He looked over at Chase. "And how I bet some are jealous."

"Alice, don't." Malcolm shook his head. "My life isn't worth it. Just run away."

"She has already made her choice." Morpheus put his sword away and extended his hand out to me. "Now come, Alice. Wonders await you."

I took his hand, fear engulfing me at his touch. He was powerful, that I could feel. I glanced back at the others who just stared at me, knowing they couldn't do anything now that Morpheus had me in his hand. So I looked forward, realizing this was my choice and I had to face the consequences.

But what those were, I still had no idea.

"You're a lot different than the Alice of legend, do you know that?" Morpheus said as he guided me through the crowd.

"I would hope so, a lot has changed in our world since then. Besides, I'm not that Alice, I'm an entirely different person."

He laughed. "I would suppose so. The old Alice was curious, sticking her nose into things she didn't need to. You, on the other hand, were dragged here, without choice, told to do this and that. You put on a brave

face but, you know what? I can see the fear in your eyes. And they tell me you are screaming inside.”

I tried not to listen to his words. “I could say the same about you. You are afraid of me, that is why you want me away from the others.”

“Maybe, at one point, I heard whispers of your name and feared what you might bring. But now, seeing you as you are, I am no longer afraid.” He let out a laugh.

I felt a shiver go down my spine. I wanted to run, I wanted to run as far away as I could. He was right, I couldn’t beat him. He really doesn’t have anything to worry about. I tried not to seem afraid, but I knew he was aware of my fear. He was the master of nightmares, and I was exactly where he wanted me.

I shook my head. No, I wouldn’t let him manipulate me with words like that. I knew he was just trying to make me scared and I wouldn’t let him win. I had Chase and the others behind me, if anything happened they would save me, that much I knew.

We stopped in front of the main tent and he turned to the crowd. “Come one, come all to the Cirque de Rêves! Don’t let reality get you down, let your fears grow all around! Leave happiness outside, and let the darkness come alive! So grab your friends, grab you children, and join us as we bring you on an adventure that will change your life!”

I couldn’t believe it as people rushed towards the entrance. He talked of fears and death and yet people came. The people wanted to be afraid.

The dreams wanted to be destroyed. How was that possible? What was he doing that was so enticing, but at the same time destroying them one by one?

“Come, I have a seat saved especially for you.” Grabbing my hand, he led me into the darkness.

CHAPTER 15

Thousands of people crowded the benches to see the wonders of the show. Each of them with darkness encompassing their faces. It seemed darker here, as if the shadows were growing over their entire head. Was this how it worked, black clouds slowly clouding their eyes and then taking over their bodies? And would I become one of them? Would I lose my dreams?

Morpheus led me to a seat in the front, smiling as if it was all a game to him, and it probably was. I didn't resist or try to run away, knowing there was no use, he was powerful enough to stop me. So I sat there and I waited for what was to come. And more importantly, I tried to prepare my mind.

I looked back behind me to find Malcolm and the others sitting a few rows up. They looked worried but they also knew they couldn't do anything inside this tent. I whispered that I was sorry. It was my fault all of this happened. I should have thought it through, I wasn't ready to face him.

The lights above the audience turned off and everything became silent. I felt uncomfortable, chilled by the pure black color. I couldn't see anything, not even my hands in front of my face. I had always thought that living outside the city that it was dark at night, but at least then I had the stars and moon to guide me. This was nothing, trapped in a world I could not see.

And it was terrifying.

Never had I been so afraid as my heart pounded in my chest, my body not wanting to move in fear there was something out there. How was this a Circus? How was this entertaining? And how did this lead to people losing their dreams?

"Alice," a whisper spoke in my ear. "What are you doing here?"

I didn't recognize the voice, it wasn't Morpheus but something about it seemed familiar. I didn't answer it but just tried to ignore it. I didn't know if it was my mind playing tricks on me or if there was someone calling me.

"Alice, are you listening to me? Shouldn't you be studying? Not wasting your time here." Whatever it was kept bothering me. Then I recognized the voice; it was my father's. Images swirled around me and all of a sudden I was at home.

“Alice?” My father was now sitting across from me. He was mad, his eyebrows down, eyes glaring at me, his face redder than I had ever seen it. “You have been failing your classes! Why aren’t you studying more?”

Report cards laid before me, F’s all across the page. I shook my head. “This isn’t real. I am in Wonderland”

“What are you talking about? This isn’t one of your stupid Japanese comics,” my mother said. “How could you do this to us? How could you bring shame upon our family?”

I tried to say something, but couldn’t. I had no idea what was going on, there was no way that this was possible. It was all fake, it had to be.

Or was Wonderland fake, and this was the truth? Had it all been just a dream? Was I back in reality?

I tried to remember how I could have gotten these scores. Did I forget to study for those tests? Was it finals? I kind of remembered finals coming up. Yeah, that’s right, finals were last week. I was going to study but I thought up some cool art subjects, and then there was the dance recital I had to prepare for. I didn’t have time to study.

“Your sisters had perfect scores throughout school, why can’t you be more like them and not waste your time with trivial things like art and dance? That’s it, I’m taking you out of dance until you can get your grades up. This isn’t acceptable.”

I shook my head. “No! You can’t do that! I love dance!”

“You should have thought of that before failing.” My father stood up and started for my room.

“Where are you going?” I called down the hallway.

“I’m getting rid of your art supplies. They are a distraction of what is really important. School.”

“No! This is a dream! This isn’t real!” I shouted, holding my head. *It had to be, right? This couldn’t be possible.*

“Stop saying nonsense. This is real life, Alice, you cannot escape reality. You will never achieve anything at this rate,” my mother yelled. “Why do you have to be such a problem for us?”

“No,” I shook my head. “You aren’t real! My parents care enough in the end to know what I want to do.”

“But you won’t make it as an artist, you will fail and be all alone,” the voice drifted through my mind. Colors changed around me and now I was

at my graduation. Kate was next to me.

“What are you doing here, Alice? Didn’t you fail your finals? You can’t graduate if you don’t pass your classes. Didn’t you get kicked out of school a few months back?” Kate asked.

“What are you talking about Kate?” I said, tears falling down my face. She looked at me in disgust. I had never seen her give me that look before. It was the same look that my parents gave me, the one they gave me when I talked about my dreams.

“This can’t be real,” I whispered. “No, Kate, you are my best friend. You can’t leave me. You are the only one who believes in me. If you leave me, I don’t know what I am going to do. I can’t do this, Kate, please help me. Please tell me it is going to be all right like you always do. Tell me that you are on my side.”

“Get away from me Alice, I don’t want to be seen with a failure like you.” With that she walked off.

I shook my head. No, my best friend would never do that to me. She was always there for me, through being bullied, through each and every argument I had with my family. She would never leave my side.

“This isn’t real!” I screamed out.

Colors shifted and I found myself on the street, all alone. No sounds, nothing. It was wet, as if it had just rained. I looked up. It was pitch black, no stars or moon in the sky. All the light around me came off a dying light bulb in the streetlamp.

“Hello?” I questioned. There was no answer. “Is anyone there?” I started running and looking into shops. All of them were empty. No one was around. “Where is everybody?”

“Gone, Alice. You are all alone. No one wants to be with you.” Morpheus appeared before me.

I shook my head, realizing what had happened. He was tricking me, making me see things that weren’t there. “No, this isn’t real! You are trying to trick me!”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter, Alice, this is your future, there’s no need to trick you. As you can see you have so many horrible things coming that I don’t even have to make any of them up. You will get nowhere and people will leave you.”

“That’s not true, I have people who love me!” I screamed out. I was starting to rock back and forth on my feet. There was no way this could be my future, I had so much more to complete. Sure, I wasn’t the best at school, but I was passing. There were plenty of art schools I could apply to, there were plenty of opportunities for me to succeed. I would never give up.

“That may be true now, but what if you fail? What if you don’t get where you want to go? Will people still be at your side? Think, Alice, will they still be there?”

More tears came flooding down my face. I didn’t know, I couldn’t think. He was right, if I couldn’t get into those schools, if I started failing my classes, there was no way I could succeed. “I don’t know!”

“To dream is to fail, Alice, you should know that. Why don’t you think practically? Why don’t you take the easy road? You were always trouble from the start, and now you have nothing to believe in.”

“I have a lot to believe in,” I whispered.

“Do you? Do you really?”

I tried to think of everything I believed in but nothing but fear was in my mind. Fear of everything I cared for leaving me. “Leave me alone! Get out of my head!”

He put his hand on my cheek. “Dear, dear Alice. If you wanted me gone you would have already done so. You know I speak the truth so you can’t get me out of my mind. You are nothing like the Alice of legend. You are just a scared little girl that has no hope for a future. I can’t believe anyone had trust in you. You are not her, you will *never* be her.”

I shook my head. “I’m not Alice, I never wanted to be Alice. I can never be as great, I can never defeat the Cirque de Rêves. I am just a failure, the Alice before me was so much stronger. I have failed.”

“That’s right. You aren’t worthy to carry the name of Alice. You are just an imposter, aren’t you?”

I slowly nodded, his words penetrating like a knife. How could I be foolish enough to think I could fill her shoes? How could I be so foolish to think I could do the things she has done. I wasn’t great, I barely was even living. I was just walking through life, not having a care. My parents were right, I was foolish.

Morpheus smiled. “But there is a way out, a way you can make all the pain go away.” He wiped away my tears. “A way you can make all the

trouble you cause others to simply disappear.”

I looked up at him in hope. “There is?”

The image around me changed. I was at the coast now, standing at the edge of a cliff. Waves roared with the storm below me. I started to get dizzy looking straight below as the wind whipped around me.

“Jump Alice! End it all now!” I heard Morpheus call out.

I stared at the ocean below me. “But there is so much to live for,” I whispered.

“Is there? Think, Alice, you have lost everything. You have brought so much trouble to everyone around you. Your mother, your father, what do they need of you? They already have two perfect daughters, you are just a disgrace. Kate? Think of all the fun she could be having if she didn’t have *you* as a best friend. She has so much potential, you are just holding her back. If you jump now, you can let them all be free.”

It felt as the waves below me were calling to me. They wanted me to jump, they wanted me to join them. They wanted me to be destroyed.

So I jumped.

CHAPTER 16

A shock went through my body as I hit the water. I sunk deeper and deeper, letting the water surround me. It felt warm and welcoming. I wanted to stay here forever. There were no worries here, there were no people here telling me what I could and could not do. Just the freedom to float and let my worries drift away. I could hide forever. I didn't feel as if I was suffocating, I didn't feel pain. I just felt nothing.

I could hear people calling my name in the distance, but their words were drowned out by the waves. I kept my eyes close, ignoring whoever it was. I didn't want to hear what they had to say, I just wanted to be left alone.

"Alice, wake up," the voices called, but I ignored them. I didn't want to wake up ever again. I didn't want to go somewhere my fears awaited me when I could just let the current take me wherever I wanted. I would no longer feel pain, I would no longer feel worry. I would just be free. I would just float here and not have to face anything again. It was all I could do, it was all that I was worth, everyone made that clear.

Whoever thought I was the same as the Alice of legend was wrong. I was clearly a failure, clearly not set out to do the task to destroy the Circus. I couldn't do anything to defeat Morpheus and I realized that now. I couldn't succeed in anything I did, so I wanted to stay here and let my life pass me by. It was safe here, nothing to hurt me and nothing to make me afraid. It was peace. It was bliss.

Why didn't people do this more often? Just sit back and let life pass them by. It was soothing, refreshing even. There would be no more wars, there would be no more pain. We could all live in harmony if everyone just gave into their fears and took the safe road. I could see that now, I had been a fool this whole time. This is what my parents wanted me to see and now my eyes were open and I could accept the fact. Dreams were worthless. They would never be achieved, not when reality would always get in the way, not when only pain awaited the dreams. Giving in to fear was the only way to go.

“Alice,” I heard the voice call again. I saw a flicker of light but I resisted it. I didn’t want to leave this place, I didn’t want to answer who was calling. “Please wake up.”

I felt as if I was moving now, but I told myself it was just the current. I could see the storm above, the clouds a dark grey. That was the outside world up there and I didn’t want any part of it. I was finally free.

The ocean was a majestic blue. It went on for what seemed to be forever. There were no creatures, no people, just me. And I liked it that way.

Something tugged on me. Light flashed through the ocean. I shook my head and fought. “No! I don’t want to leave!”

The force was too great, whatever was trying to take me was succeeding. I felt like I was drowning, I couldn’t breath.

My eyes flashed open to find Malcolm’s lips against mine. *Why was he kissing me?* I tried to jump back but he held my head firmly in place. I kept pushing him away, trying to get him to let go, let him know I was awake. Mouth-to-mouth was not supposed to keep going. Then I felt something weird, something in my chest, in my heart. It hurt, sharp pain piercing my heart. Malcolm didn’t let go, his lips against mine. Whatever was in my chest felt as if it was coming to my throat.

Was Malcolm sucking? What the heck? What was going on?

He backed away and I saw his eyes. They were black, solid black, like something off of *Supernatural*. If I had salt, I probably would have thrown it at him just as a reaction. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When his eyes flickered open again, the black was gone.

I looked around to find myself back at the Red and White Kingdom. Everyone was there including Howard. Chase stared at me and it was the first time I had ever seen him scared.

“What happened?” I asked as I tried to catch my breath. “How did I get here?”

“We brought you back,” Chase explained. “I made a few portals, hopefully they won’t figure out which one is correct. They have a one in fifty chance of choosing the right one before they completely close.”

I thought back to the last moments I remembered. I remembered going to the Cirque de Rêves, Morpheus taking me inside. Then the lights shut off. “That darkness...”

“Was Morpheus, he can control the shadows and make you see anything you fear,” Howard explained. “He was successful in engulfing your mind into the darkness. Malcolm and the others brought you back here since you wouldn’t wake up. They had to get you out of there, Morpheus had you in his clutches. You are lucky they were capable of doing that.”

I placed my hand over my mouth, and closed my eyes. I didn’t want to remember that darkness, I didn’t want to ever go back. Everything I worried about, everything that I feared could happen. I had jumped... I felt tears form in my eyes.

“It’s all right Alice, it’s over now. You don’t have anything to worry about with us around.” Malcolm placed his hand on my shoulder. “We won’t let him get to you so easily again.”

I shook my head and pushed away his hand. “I can’t defeat him, not after what I’ve seen him do. There’s no possible way.”

Malcolm just stared down at me, not sure what he should say. I started shuddering at what I had seen, at what I had done. Morpheus was powerful, there was no denying that fact. If he could control me, control what I was thinking, how could I defeat that. I had watched him fight Malcolm with a sword, maybe if I had enough training I could last a while using a sword, but there was so much more than that. He was more powerful than I ever imagined. He could get inside people’s heads and that was the end of that.

How was he even able to do that? How was he able to know what I feared, what anyone feared? Each being here was someone’s dreams back in the real world. That meant that each and every person was dealing with the same darkness that I was facing. If that was the case, if Morpheus was able to get in each and every one of their minds, that meant he was practically in more places than once. *How could I defeat that? How could I get him to stop being in my mind, making me see things that weren’t possible?* I just wanted to cry, and was, in front of the boys I had just started being friends with. I bet that looked great.

“Alice.” Howard knelt down next to me and looked straight into my eyes. “You are brave, you can defeat him. You were able to go there and come back alive.”

“Only because Malcolm, Chase, and Melvin and Davis were there. Only because they pulled me out and got me to wake up. If I was there alone, I would be gone.”

“But that’s the thing, you aren’t alone. You have friends that will help you. That is where you are stronger than Morpheus. He has no one but himself, and at the end of a battle, that is obvious. You just have to figure out a way to defeat him for good. He is not that strong if you can overcome your fears. The real person you have to beat isn’t Morpheus, but your own thoughts. If you can do that, you can beat him.”

“But why me? Why can’t someone else defeat him with their mind? It already doesn’t affect any of you, why can’t you all just go against him?”

“Because we aren’t a dream. We aren’t connected to any human. It makes it impossible for us to touch him in the end. It has to be someone who has dreams, someone who can get past their fears and believe in something as pure as a dream.”

“But what if I can’t do that?” I asked as I wiped the tears away from my face. “What if he makes it so I never wake up again?”

“I will always be there to wake you up, just remember that,” Malcolm said.

Chase added. “All of us will be, you don’t need to worry about that. Malcolm isn’t the only one who can save you. You have all of us.”

“How did you even wake me up this time?” I asked Malcolm.

“I took the darkness out of you and swallowed it,” Malcolm explained as if it were that simple. I just stared at him. *Was that how his eyes were black? Because it really was like having a demon inside of him?* It was crazy to think about, and if I wasn’t in Wonderland I don’t think I could have believed it.

“But how?” I persisted. There were so many things that I didn’t understand, things that I wanted to know about. I wondered if I would ever be able to understand everything that was in this world. Probably not.

“Morpheus isn’t the only one who has lived in darkness for most of his life. I’m not afraid of it and have learned to live with my demons,” Malcolm explained. I wondered what exactly he meant by that, what kind of demons could be lurking behind those light eyes of his. *Did I want to know? Whatever it was caused Chase not to trust him, to think so poorly of him. What could he have done that made him seclude himself in the Dark Forest?*

“But what if you aren’t there? What if I am all alone? How will I wake up?” I asked. And it was a fear of mine, a fear that Morpheus could now use

against me. God, I needed to stop thinking. My brain was just causing it to get worse and worse.

Malcolm grabbed my head and forced me to look at him. "You will never be alone, you hear me? I will always be here to protect you. All of us."

I looked around and found the rest of guys nodding. Even Chase was smiling, trying to reassure me that he would always be at my side, and for some reason out of all of them, I knew I could trust him to be there the most. He never lied to me, always told me exactly what I needed to hear. I smiled.

"Thank you, all of you. I'm sorry I am so weak."

"You aren't weak, Morpheus is just very strong," Malcolm added. "And knows how to find a person's weakness. All we need to do next is figure out what his weakness is."

Suddenly bells went off. They rang throughout the kingdom, echoing off all the buildings and statues. I jumped up, not sure what I needed to do. Was it a fire alarm, intruder? What did it mean? Everyone turned to the balcony, staring outside. No one was smiling anymore, a stern look covered each and everyone's face. Howard pointed at me. "Stay with Alice. All of you. I will go see what it is."

Quickly, Howard ran outside and stared towards the entrance of the city. I had no idea what to do, why I needed to stay where I was. Howard had looked scared and that made me begin to worry all the more.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

Malcolm didn't respond to my question, but kept looking towards where Howard had disappeared. "Melvin, Chase, watch Alice. Davis, you come with me."

Melvin and Chase nodded and Davis hurried off with Malcolm to see what Howard was up to.

"Don't worry Alice, it's probably nothing. Sometimes these bells go off because of birds and such. Mosquitoes sometimes. Hell, even I have set it off a few times. Heh, that was fun, wasn't it Melvin?" Chase smiled, trying to reassure me but I knew better.

Melvin didn't seem to want to turn his attention back from the doorway. "Yeah, fun. You pulling tricks like that all the time is fun."

“Hey, what is that supposed to mean?” Chase seemed more bothered by the comment than the alarms sounding. He could keep his cool in almost any situation it seemed. I envied that, and realized it must have been the reason that Morpheus couldn’t control him with fear. Chase knew how to put it in the back of his head, if he even felt fear. At the current moment, it didn’t seem like he did.

“I mean,” Melvin went on, frustrated as his cheeks were beginning to turn red. “This better not be one of your tricks, or I swear to God I will kill you if Malcolm doesn’t get to you first. Hell, if he did I would just find a way to bring you back from the underworld and kill you again.”

Wow, I thought. *Harsh*. I knew that Chase pulled some pranks, but I knew he wouldn’t even go that far to scare us like that. At least, I hoped not. But it made me wonder what other pranks he has pulled to make them think that he could be behind something like this.

“It’s not,” he whispered. “Not after everything...” he stopped talking, realizing he shouldn’t bring it all up. Because we all knew, deep down, that there was only one reason those alarms would sound. Only one reason Howard would look so worried, why Malcolm would leave my side.

Someone was here. Someone had found the base.

CHAPTER 17

Melvin and Chase were silent as we waited for the others to come back. Although it was very likely that they had followed us to the Red and White Kingdom, I still tried to believe that something benign had set off the alarm. I tried to keep positive thoughts, but it was nearly impossible as I watched the concerned look on both Melvin and Chase's face take shape. Even Chase was beginning to look worried.

I wanted to try and lighten the mood by talking about something, anything really, but I was afraid to make a sound. They could be near us, and if that was the case, then we needed to be extra careful. I wasn't going to screw this all up again, not that I hadn't already. It was my fault that they had found us, I shouldn't have gone to the Circus.

This was really all my fault.

God, I was such a fool thinking I could be any sort of match for Morpheus, that I could make it through going to the Circus. He was stronger, greater than me on so many levels. He could get inside my brain and I had no idea how to get him out.

You are mine, Alice. You will never escape.

I blinked. Was that really him talking or had that just been in my mind, my fear letting him control me.

Does it matter?

I pushed back his voice. This wasn't the time to worry about such things, this wasn't the time to have self-doubt. I had to be strong right now, I had to stand up and fight with others if need be,

Howard, Malcolm, and Davis all came back into the castle, looking distraught. So an intruder had made it into the kingdom. We were under attack.

"We have to get out of here." Howard grabbed a couple of swords and tossed them to Davis and Melvin. I patted my belt, making sure I still had my own katana at my side. "You two take care of her. Get her out of here. Chase, make portals to confuse them. Malcolm and I will hold them off."

Melvin put his arm around me and guided me towards the exit. "Let's go Alice."

I shook my head. “No, I want to fight. I have to help you all. Please let me help.”

Malcolm was the one to respond. “No, you aren’t strong enough yet. We need to get you out of here.”

“But what if something happens to you? What if we don’t find each other again?” I asked, drawing my sword. “I can fight.”

“We will find each other, we will all be okay. But in order for me to fight my best, I can’t have you near the battle. I can’t be worrying about you the entire time, okay? If you want to win, if you want to help, listen to me. Get the hell out of here.”

I stared at him for a moment. He was right, I would be in the way. I would just be a liability. I put my katana away and nodded to Malcolm. “Fine. But promise me that all of you will be okay. Promise me you will come find us and we will defeat Morpheus together.”

Malcolm put his hand on my shoulder. “I promise. Now run.”

Turning to Melvin and Davis, I nodded as we made our way outside. The last thing I saw was the three of them talking to each other, figuring out their battle plan. I just hoped everything would be all right.

“Where are we going to meet with them? Was that even established? I asked, realizing that no one had said anything. My heart started to race even more.

Davis nodded. “We know where to meet up, don’t worry. It’s our second hideout, about eight hours out from here. It’s always been the meet up spot if we were ever attacked.”

That made sense, it wasn’t recently that they had to worry about getting caught. They probably had many backup plans to go off of. “Who is after us?”

“It’s Bill, the man who chased us through the forest earlier,” Davis explained. “He must have been at the Cirque de Rêves waiting for us, he is the only one who can reopen Chase’s portals.”

“And the White Rabbit?”

“No,” Melvin answered. “He can only make portals to your world, not within this world. We figured making so many would take too long to sort out, but if we knew Bill was at the Circus we never would have gone. None of us thought he would be there.”

“But that’s better than Morpheus finding us, isn’t it?” I questioned as we started to pick up our pace. While running, the kingdom seemed even larger, as we still were nowhere near the boundaries.

Davis shrugged. “Really, that all depends on who you ask.”

That was not something I wanted to hear, but I tried not to think about it. I tried not to think about getting captured and going back to that Circus, facing my fears all over again. I shuddered at the thought. No, I would not let him take control of me like that, I would not cower now and let him win. I focused on escaping and making it out fine. It was all I really could do.

We got to the edge of the castle courtyard and were finally in the city itself. I could hear men around us, yelling as they searched us out. We not only had to run, but we also had to be as silent as we could. Melvin grabbed my hand as we could hear a group of men get closer, pulling me around the corner into an alleyway.

At least I knew, that the people I was with had the home field advantage, as this was a place they hid in and knew it like the back of their hands. The soldiers that attacked however, probably haven’t been in this kingdom for decades, if they even had actually been here. I wondered how many of them were dreams, or if they had simply existed here forever like Malcolm and the others.

We didn’t slow down for an instant. Melvin and Davis had a lot more stamina than I gave them credit for. I, on the other hand, did not. The only thing that was pushing me forward was adrenaline and the fact I didn’t want to get caught. My legs ached like never before, even more than the one time I went to racquetball with my sister and her conditioning coach made us do drills like none other. Nice guy, really like a big teddy bear, but you didn’t want to disobey him. Ever.

More yelling surrounded us and I began to wonder if they would find us, if all this running was for nothing. We had weapons, but would it really be enough? Would we be able to escape them if we came face to face? Maybe with the soldiers, but with Bill, I doubted it.

Although I understood how dreams could be clouded in the darkness, I wondered how exactly those who have always been in Wonderland could be affected. That had existed for so long, yet they still had fears. But of what? Melvin, Davis, Chase, and Malcolm hadn’t been affected because they had learned to live with fear, but could it really be possible that they were the

only ones who weren't affected? It was strange to think that people who have lived so long hadn't learned to live with their fears. Didn't growing up mean that you could overcome your fears? That was always how I looked at the world. I guess I was wrong.

We hurried further and further into the city, trying to get out into the woods where we could hide much easier, I presumed. I just hoped I wouldn't have to climb up any more trees, especially without Chase. At least with him, if I fell, he could easily catch me by making a portal.

I wished he was with me, as I felt most safe with him. Even though Bill could open portals, at least Chase could get us away from here and try to trick Bill into going somewhere else.

I hoped that they all were okay.

A couple of soldiers appeared before us, but Davis and Melvin pulled out their swords. Davis had a claymore while Melvin had a saber. It was strange that a lot of the people had different types of swords, but I guess it made sense that after so many years they would all have their own preferences. The soldiers pulled out their rapiers.

Melvin was the first to attack, his saber slashing down towards the soldier. The soldier easily defended against it, but Melvin had only been faking him out. Quickly he turned the blade and swiped from the opposite side, cutting into the soldier's leg. The man fell to the ground, screaming out in pain, but I could tell he wasn't out of the fight.

The second soldier headed towards Melvin, stabbing his rapier straight at Melvin. Davis was the one who stepped in this time. He countered the attack with the claymore, which he held almost like a katana. Strength was found at the top of the handle and control near the bottom. It was starting to make more sense when I saw it in action.

The first soldier started to get up, even with a wounded leg. Melvin slashed down at him but the man deflected the attack and parried it.

I watched in amazement as these two men fought like they did. I didn't realize how good they were at sword fighting. It seemed like it was necessity in this place.

Suddenly, as I watched them fight, I felt someone grab me from behind. As I screamed, the person put a knife under my throat.

"Alice!" Melvin exclaimed as he cut down his opponent. "Let her go!"

Davis got distracted and I watched as his sword was knocked out of his hand and the soldier punched him in the nose. Davis hit the ground.

Melvin started for him, but the guy that held me stopped him. “No, you stay there. I am not kidding or the girl gets it.”

He stopped and stared at me, trying to figure out what we should do next. I struggled but it was useless. Besides, this man had a knife under my chin.

That was it. A knife.

I still had the knife from earlier. I reached for it, acting as if I was still trying to struggle as he kept his attention fixed on Melvin and Davis. The soldier was thrusting at Davis, trying to stab him through the stomach. Davis crawled away from him, trying to get back in a better defensive position but it was almost pointless. I had to act fast.

Drawing my knife, I stabbed the man that held me straight in the stomach, moving my neck away from his own knife as I spun around and stabbed him again. As he went down, I pulled out my katana and deflected the other soldier’s rapier as he thrust at Davis.

“Not today!” I yelled as I slashed forward right through the man’s torso. The man hit the ground just as the other two had fallen.

I just killed someone. He had been attacking my friends, there was no other way. But still... I didn’t know what to think, but with everything going on, I didn’t have time to waste, I knew that.

Looking back up I found Davis and Melvin just staring at me.

“What? Shouldn’t we get going?” I asked, wanting to change the subject. I had to deal with this later.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Melvin put away his own saber. Davis quickly picked up his claymore and hurried after us.

As we ran, I noticed that it seemed like more and more men were starting to follow us. I hoped Malcolm and Howard were all right, after seeing many soldiers dashing through the city. *Were they only going after Bill? Or were they trying to fight them all?*

I could hear the clashing of swords behind us. Malcolm and Howard must have been close. I felt a bit excited, knowing that they were still okay, but then I realized that meant Bill was near, and our chances of escape were growing smaller and smaller. I kept running, hoping that we could make it out of the city in time.

My legs were aching even more, the adrenaline starting to weaken. I was going to be so sore later, but if we made it out alive I wouldn't care. The pain was nothing compared to what I had endured in the Circus.

Just as we rounded a corner, Chase appeared in front of us.

"Chase—" I began but he cut me off as he turned to Melvin and Davis. They appeared as if they were going to punch him.

"I will meet you all there." With that, he quickly grabbed my wrist and the last thing I heard was Davis and Melvin yelling at him.

Before I could even blink, I was up high in the tree, in the same place he took me the other night. His tree fort. I tried to catch my breath but my heart was racing and everything around me was a dizzy mess. *Why would he pull me out of there? Had the plan changed, had something gone wrong?*

"Calm down, you are safe here." Chase sat down next to me, looking down at the battle that was going on. There were so many soldiers, I had no idea. There had to be over a hundred running through the streets, searching for us.

"Why..."

"They would have captured you if I didn't intervene. They were naïve to think they could just run away from Bill." Chase sighed as his attention was still on the city below. "This was the only way."

"I thought Bill could find portals, won't he be able to find us?" I asked as I sat down next to him. There really wasn't anything I could do, as there was no way I could get down without Chase deciding to take me along with him.

Chase shook his head. "I made too many portals, he would have to know this was the right one."

I stared down at the city. It was scary to imagine just moments ago I was in the middle of all that. "How did he find us?"

"I don't know, I made over four dozen portals. He shouldn't have been this prepared, if anything he would have just sent scouts to each. He knew this was the correct one somehow," Chase said, frustrated that he had failed at his job. I felt bad for him, knowing that Howard and the others may blame him for Bill finding us. But I knew it wasn't his fault, there had to be something else going on.

"What now?"

He took a deep breath. “We wait. I told the others where to meet. We wait for everything to die down then we will meet them there.”

I looked back down at everything going on, searching for the others. I found Melvin and Davis still running towards the edge of the city, knowing that they still had to act as if I was with them to keep the soldiers chasing after them. As for Malcolm and Howard, it took me a moment to find them, but when I did I couldn’t believe what I saw.

The two of them were fending off at least twenty men. *Were they really that strong? Could they really make it out of there alive?*

Malcolm promised me that they would be okay, he promised me that they would make it out safely and meet up with us, that he would be there when we faced Morpheus again. But the odds were completely against him. There was no way that someone could fight that many men at once.

My eyes didn’t leave the two of them. I could see exactly how the fight was going, but I could tell that many of the soldiers had fallen to the ground from the two of them fighting their hearts out. Malcolm and Howard were back-to-back as they went up against their next attackers. Even though they were surrounded, they had the upper hand with that stance. I had faith in them, but the worry they’d lose still wouldn’t leave my mind.

That was when it happened. The soldiers made them break their stance.

Chase slowly stood up, his cat-eyes fixated on Malcolm and Howard. They no longer held a great defense, separated from each other. One of the soldiers, thrust at Howard and I watched as the sword went through his stomach.

I tried to scream out but Chase quickly placed his hand over my mouth. “Shh! We can’t be heard up here.”

After a few deep breaths, I nodded and he let go of me.

“Alice, I have to go down there and save Malcolm, he won’t be able to fight all of them by himself. I’m leaving you here alone. Don’t make a sound, all right? You will be safe you just have to wait for me.”

I wanted to say no, don’t leave me, but he was right. He had to get Malcolm out of there. There was no way Malcolm could defeat all those men by himself.

Chase disappeared and I peered down to see him appear next to Malcolm. Malcolm looked surprised and pissed but Chase grabbed him and they both disappeared to another place.

I looked around, searching for them but I saw no trace. I closed my eyes and whispered to myself. "It's all right Alice, he will be back, he will be back for you."

Minutes went by, which felt like hours as my heart pounded in my chest. If anything happened to them, I would be stuck up here. *How would I get down?* I was at least five stories high in a tree.

I heard footsteps behind me. "Chase?" I spun around to find a tall brown haired man. Not Chase. It was the man I had seen in the forest. It was Bill, his brown hair a bit messy as he had been fighting below. Blood stained his coat but he didn't seem to be injured. He smiled, as if victorious.

"Sorry, young lady, but your friends have failed in protecting you. It's time you came with me." He started to reach out for me but I quickly backed away and pulled out my katana.

"Get away from me!"

"Just put the sword away, I don't want to hurt you."

"Liar." I thrust forward but he stepped out of the way of the attack.

"I see the boys tried to train you with a sword. How adorable."

I swung at him again and again but he dodged each attack. He didn't even pull out his own sword.

"You better put that thing away before you hurt yourself," he teased.

"Stop treating me like a child!" I thrust forward again but he simply stepped out of the way once more. This time though, I lost my footing and slipped backwards towards the edge. Dropping my katana, I screamed as I began to fall down off of the board towards the ground way below.

Bill caught my arm and pulled me back up. "Don't worry, I got you."

I looked down, imagining what could have happened. Pancake, that is what would have happened. "Why did you save me?"

"I told you, I'm not here to hurt you. I just want to take you back to the King and Queen. They have a few questions for you."

"Alice!"

I turned to find Chase standing there. He pulled out his sword to fight Bill.

"Sorry kitty-cat, but you lost this one." Bill kicked Chase straight in the stomach and he tumbled down off of the branch.

"Chase!" I screamed as he fell down towards the ground.

“He’s alright, he can make portals remember? Kitty-cat always lands on his feet.” Bill pushed a few buttons on his wristband. “Now, let’s get out of here, shall we?”

CHAPTER 18

I never saw any of the others as Bill took me by horseback towards the Dream Kingdom. I had to admit, it was pretty awkward having his arms around me to grab the reigns. I just hoped that we wouldn't have to ride this way too long.

There were still at least seventy soldiers left in the group, all of them surrounding Bill as he made his way back to the Dream Kingdom. I admit, I was quite relieved that he was taking me to the King and Queen instead of to Morpheus. Although I knew nothing about them, I felt a bit safer not having to worry about going back to the Circus, to the place that held my greatest fear.

I hoped that the others were safe and were trying to figure out a way to help me. Not that I only relied on them to save me, I would also try to figure out a way to escape, but I wanted to trust that my friends would help, that I wasn't alone in this. There was only so much I could do, I didn't know everything about this place, but I would keep an eye out for any chance to run that I could.

Getting rather bored with the ride, I started to look around me. Just as everyone else was, each of the soldier's eyes were masked with darkness. Morpheus had gotten to them as well. I wondered what all of their fears were and why they couldn't overcome them. I also wondered why they were awake, when I couldn't wake up until Malcolm took the shadow out of me. Maybe Morpheus did something different so I wouldn't come back, something that left me completely paralyzed. And, if that was the case, why did he go to such lengths for me? *Did he really think I was a threat deep down and didn't want to take any chances?*

At this point, it didn't matter. He no longer worried about me being a threat, as he told me again and again. And, truthfully, I didn't see what I could do to bring him down and save this place. It was out of my reach to even consider doing something. On top of that, the supposed original Alice had left me something in case help was ever needed, in case her successor, which I still doubted was me, needed to fight. I wondered why she would hide something for another to find, but not tell a soul. *Did she not trust*

anyone here? Not even Malcolm or Chase? That seemed hard to believe, but I guess if you didn't know what the future held, you couldn't be too careful.

How would I even know what it was that she left me? How was I supposed to understand something that was never explained? This place held so many questions that it was starting to get annoying.

It hit me again, what had happened back there—the fact that I had stabbed someone. In this place all the citizens were dreams, did that include soldiers? Or were they like in the stories of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and simply here to fill a roll? But either way, I couldn't have let my friends get hurt, no matter the cost. I owed them that much, as they had risked their lives for me.

Still, the idea left me shaking and I didn't know what to think. I decided that I had to push those thoughts behind me and keep my mind occupied.

"Why don't you just transport me to the King and Queen? Wouldn't that be easier than riding horseback the entire way?" I asked, sick of the quiet. Even with the enemy, I couldn't stand staying quiet for too long.

"Only the Cheshire Cat can make portals, I just have a way to reopen them in a small timeframe. That's how I found you. He wasn't very smart putting you somewhere where you couldn't escape," Bill explained.

"He didn't think you would find the right portal." I tried defending him.

"Well, he was wrong then, wasn't he?"

I glanced around the wilderness that surrounded me. It was quiet other than the crunching of leaves under the horses' hooves. There wasn't another living being in sight.

"They will come for me," I stated as a matter of fact. "You will see."

"Oh, I'm counting on that. Otherwise this story wouldn't be very interesting." Bill lashed on the reins to make the horse start galloping faster.

It seemed like hours passed as we headed towards the edge of the forest and into the Dream Kingdom. Although I was practically being arrested, I kind of wanted to know what this kingdom looked like. It was called the Dream Kingdom, but did that mean the kingdom would be themed like the Red and White Kingdom? And if so, what theme is a dream? Would it be all clouds, fluffy and serene? Or was it different, more of a hazy existence?

There still was no sign of any of the others. Although I knew Chase could pull through with his portal jumps and land safely on the ground

below, I still hoped that he was okay. It was nerve-racking watching someone start to fall that high up, even more so when it was one's self. I had almost fallen as well, and unlike Chase, I couldn't land on my feet, so to speak.

I was lucky that Bill wanted me alive, lucky that he didn't just watch as I fell, my life ending right then and there. He needed me alive for some reason, saying that the King and Queen wanted to see me. Why was that? Why would they want to meet me? It was confusing, to say the least, as all of them had been influenced by Morpheus. Could Morpheus be there as well? We weren't going to the Cirque de Rêves, but that didn't mean that he couldn't travel somewhere else.

I thought back on the last moments before Bill had captured me. Howard, he died trying to make sure I got out of there alive. I couldn't believe he was dead, I couldn't believe all of this had happened and I was still in the enemy's hands. That meant his death was for nothing, that meant I had failed on my task of staying safe and getting to the meeting spot.

Then it hit me—if I did escape, I had no idea where to look for the others. I had no idea where the meeting place was. Yes, they would probably be figuring out how to get me out of Bill's grasp, but what if I figured it out before then? What if I escaped? Then what do I do? It wasn't as if I could hide or ask for help, everyone was shadowed in the darkness that represented fear. Another thing to think about, on top of everything.

Once we came out of the woods, I could see the Kingdom of Dreams in the distance. I gasped. It was brilliant and more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. Everything around it appeared to be night, but the Kingdom itself was lit like the starry sky. I didn't know if it was actually night or if it was always like that. It seemed to be daytime in the woods just a moment ago, so it had to be the natural state.

The Kingdom was surrounded by small buildings, almost like an ancient style Japanese village with paper doors and tiled roofs. Lanterns lined the streets and everything seemed to be a dream, perfect to someone like me. If I hadn't just been kidnapped I would have been pretty excited to visit such a place.

When we got closer, I could make out more of the palace. It was a lot grander than anything around it. A large steep bridge was the only way to enter the palace. It seemed to be something from the historic district of

Kyoto. It glowed in the town like a gem in the rough. It was more colorful than I could have imagined, with royal purples, blues, and reds making up most of the walls.

As we entered the kingdom, I watched as people hid away in the buildings before we came close to them. They were afraid, afraid as everyone else was in this kingdom. Was it just a general fear, or did they fear Bill and his men. It probably had something to do with the Cirque de Rêves. Masked with darkness, they couldn't see the light. Some people didn't hide, though, but went about their business. They didn't fear Bill like the others did.

Bill led the horse over the steep bridge. I looked down to see the palace surrounded by water. I could see orange glowing fish as they swam around. It was wondrous.

We stopped in front of the entrance and Bill helped me off of the horse. My legs were completely sore, but I still managed to walk like I was fine. Never show pain, that was my motto. That and I didn't know what they would do to me if I couldn't walk. I didn't say a word as he led me inside.

The inside was even more spectacular than the outside. Everything was lit up, softly but boldly, in solid primary colors. Lanterns hung from the ceiling and I swore even the walls seemed to glow. Magnificent scrolls covered the walls, scrolls of what appeared to be depictions of past battles. There was one that looked like the battle against the Heart Kingdom and one of the Red and White Kingdom. They were beautiful and I stared at them in awe. I wished I could paint like that.

Along with these gems, there were other paintings of different things such as butterflies, dragons, landscapes, and so on. Each one had to have taken hours and hours, but I supposed that they had a long while to create this decor, as the kingdom had been created shortly after the last Alice left.

There were many workers inside the palace, doing their daily job as normal, ignoring Bill and his men. They wore fantastic outfits, kimonos of all styles, as they went about their business. I simple gawked at them, wondering if I could get my hands on one. But the realization that I wasn't here on vacation kicked in. I was here to be taken as prisoner to the King and Queen.

We walked further into the palace, more decorations and scrolls covering all the walls. I didn't say a word as Bill led me, only a couple of

his men now following us. I wished I could read his face, but the darkness made it near impossible.

Bill stopped me in front of two grand doors. Dragons were carved into the wood, along with cherry blossoms. “This is it, Alice, the moment you have been waiting for.”

I held my breath as the doors began to open.

CHAPTER 19

I couldn't believe my eyes. The room was magical, and if it weren't for being worried for my life, I might have enjoyed it. Glorious golds and reds swirled up the walls with more paper lanterns floating in the air above us. Steps led up to where the King and Queen sat.

The King wore a traditional deep blue robe, the same color as night, with small stars that were sprinkled on it. If he stood in the window, I probably wouldn't have seen him. It appeared that he had brown hair, but it was hard to tell as his face was masked in the darkness. *Did that mean he was going to disappear as well?*

The Queen, on the other hand, wore a light color, almost like that of a cloud. Light pinks and yellow and purples accented the brightness of her kimono. She wore a light blue belt that made her seem more like a dream. As I entered, they stood up.

"At last, we meet the spectacular Alice," the Queen said as she stepped down the steps. "Was she a bother to capture, Bill?"

"No task is too hard for my queen." Bill bowed down. I just stared at her. Her golden hair draped loosely on her shoulders. I wondered what beauty the darkness hid beneath. Her skin and hair seemed to be perfect, and she must have had such great beauty underneath.

She stopped in front of me. "What is it? Have you never met a Queen before?"

"I have not," I answered, realizing that I had been staring. It was probably incredibly rude of me and I felt stupid for doing such a thing.

"Well, now you have," she answered. "But what I want to know is why my dear Malcolm left my side and went after you. Why you are more important than his Queen, the Queen he swore loyalty to."

I shook my head. "I don't know."

She let out a sharp laugh. "Such modesty, my dear girl, will get you *killed*. Now answer my question."

"I really don't know. They abducted me from the real world and brought me here, I'm still not sure why," I explained.

"Hm. The real world? Is this world not real?"

“I... I just meant my world.”

“Both this world and that world go together, they cannot be separated, each ties into the other,” she snapped. “They are, in a sense, one and the same. Although I haven’t seen your world, I would believe it is much like this one.”

I glanced around. “Not quite, but sure.”

The Queen stood there for a moment, as if examining me. “I still don’t quite get it. My best men left me. Malcolm, Melvin, Davis, all three of them left me for you. I don’t understand why you are so special.”

I shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

“And they were in the Red and White Kingdom?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes ma’am. That is why her capture took so long.”

“Not because Malcolm is a better soldier than you?”

Bill didn’t answer, which made me start to wonder if what Malcolm had said earlier about him being better at tracking and fighting was true. I guess he had showed this entire kingdom how powerful he truly was.

But then I messed up, and here I was.

“I thought so,” the Queen added. “But Bill, do you have anything to say on the matter? Is this not the Alice of legend?”

“Your majesty, this is the girl the boys had with them. Howard even gave his life for her. She is the one,” Bill explained, trying not to upset the Queen any further.

I felt my heart fall into my stomach at the mention of Howard. He had given his life to protect me only for me to get myself captured. I was such a nuisance, I should have learned how to fight better, I should have been able to protect myself.

“Then explain to me how this girl can be connected to the Alice of legend.” She pointed at me viciously. “This girl is puny compared to her! She can’t be the one they risk their lives for.”

Bill didn’t say a word as the Queen approached me. Her face was right in front of mine and I could almost make out her eyes. I think they might have been blue.

“What makes you so special?! What makes you think you can overthrow this kingdom?” she yelled.

I wanted to back away, but there was nowhere to go. I was cornered with a Queen yelling in my face. Not something I could ever prepare for,

that was the truth. I was scared that she might order my head to be chopped off, even though it was another Queen's trademark.

"Answer me supposed Alice!" she demanded.

"I already told you I didn't know," I murmured. "It wasn't my choice to be here. Your White Rabbit tried to kill me."

She whipped around. "Where is that Rabbit?"

"Right here, your majesty." The little white-haired boy appeared. I took a step back. He was as disturbing as the first moment I saw him. A little kid with rabbit ears, yet more dangerous than anyone I knew, or at least anyone I knew in the real world. Everyone seemed to be dangerous here.

"Tell me why you think this girl is the Alice of legend," the Queen demanded.

"Because she has the same mind as her. Just look at her eyes. She has that curiosity that always got the old Alice in trouble," the little boy answered as he stepped up to me, his face covered in a shadow now. Why he didn't have one before, I wasn't sure. Must have been because he was on Earth. "Yup, just like the old Alice."

The Queen's lips perked as she stared at me. "I suppose you would know since you brought the first Alice here." She clapped her hands together. "Then it is settled, you are the Alice we are looking for."

"I still don't think I'm..." I began.

"Shush, you are only to speak when spoken to!"

I shut my mouth quickly. I didn't see how this Queen was any different in temperament than the Queen of Hearts as Malcolm and Howard had said. Maybe the shadow was causing her to act like this, to act like all the queens before her.

"Now, what are we to do with our dear Alice." She started circling me, which made me very conscious of my body. What exactly was she looking for. "You seem so ordinary looking. Although, so was the other Alice, but the other Alice took down the Heart Kingdom and tried to stop the Red and White Kingdom."

"Your majesty," Bill said. "We did find the Cheshire Cat with her. He seems to be helping Malcolm and the others."

"Well, well, isn't that strange? That little kitty never takes orders from anyone." She tapped her chin. "You must be one special girl to have that nuisance wrapped around your finger."

“He was with the others before I came along, it had nothing to do with me,” I explained.

The Queen laughed. “But everything has to do with Alice, it always does.” She spun around on her heel. “Take her to the dungeon. The boys will come for her and we will be ready to capture them as well.”

Bill bowed. “Yes, your majesty.”

He grabbed my arm and led me out of the throne room.

And that was my first encounter with the Queen of Dreams.

CHAPTER 20

Bill led me down through the palace. I couldn't believe how many different floors there were. Although it had looked large on the outside, it must have gone deeper into the ground because there was no way it could go on for this long down into the ground. We seemed to walk on forever. There were no elevators, which surprised me and made me realize that a lot of people here were pretty fit. It must have been due to running around all over the palace.

Once we got to the last floor, I noticed the smell of salty water beginning to sting my nostrils. It was so strong I could taste it. It reminded me of summers at my parent's beach house, if you can call the Oregon coast a beach. The water was always cold and you always seemed to need a jacket, even in the midst of summer. And don't touch the water unless you are trying to play freeze-out.

We came to an area that appeared like a prison. I gulped as I smelled the stench of uncleanness as many people down here probably hadn't left their cell for a long while. I wondered how long I would be down here until I could escape or was taken somewhere else.

So I was right about this being the lowest level, as one would keep prisoners in the deepest part of a palace, I would figure. That way it would be harder for them to escape because they would need to go up a few levels to the exit. There was no way that was possible without being seen.

Which meant escape was going to be very difficult in this place. Great.

Opening one of the doors, Bill shoved me inside. "Don't worry, Alice, soon your rescuers will come, and we will be waiting."

He laughed as he shut the door behind him. To say he was cocky was an understatement. Gathering myself, I peered around at my new surroundings. This room wasn't as brilliant as the others were, which made sense. This was the prison. The light was dim, all the walls were beige, and there were not any beautiful lanterns to guide my way through the room.

There was a barred window on one of the walls, letting in a little light from the starry sky. I went over to it and peered out. Waves thrashed about just below it, letting in a mist of salt water. That was where the smell was

coming from. There wasn't anything else under the palace except water, which also meant escaping that way would be near impossible. These people knew what they were doing.

"Wish they put in an actual window, eh? Keep that cold water out," a voice said behind me.

I jumped, startled, and spun around to find a tall man standing behind me. He had a long trench coat on and his fists jammed into his pockets. He peered out the window next to me.

"Glad they didn't take my coat away or I would be freezing down here in this cell." Turning back to me, he held out a hand. "Name's Kenny."

I slowly shook his hand, surprised I didn't notice another person in here with me earlier. Maybe I just assumed I was alone. Some of the areas were pretty shadowed, he must have been hiding. "Alice."

He opened his mouth widely. "So you're Alice, glad to see the boys finally found you."

"You know Malcolm and the others?" I asked, surprised that I had been thrown into a prison with someone else that knew the situation we were in. I wondered if all the other ones were full or if Bill had simply forgotten he was here. Either way, I was glad to have some company.

"Aye, they are friends of mine. I helped them out here and there." He gestured around. "Until I got caught. Which was just a matter of time, really. I'm very unlucky when it comes to getting captured..." He trailed off, as if he had many memories of being captured. I wondered how many times he had been locked away.

I examined him. He had quite a cute face, actually, like a puppy dog. He was a bit older than me, probably about thirty. As for his eyes, they were large and brown. That's when it hit me. "Wait, your face isn't masked with a shadow."

He raised his eyebrow. "Just now noticed that? Brilliant, you are." He sat down on the ground, cross-legged. He was quite a character indeed. "Now, tell me, what did the idiot boys do to get you trapped down here? Why did they mess up protecting precious Alice?"

I turned, letting my eyes focus on the distant shore across the water. "It wasn't them, it was me. I screwed up."

"Ah, what did you do then? Had to be pretty bad to land you down here," he teased. I didn't appreciate his attitude, not in this situation at least.

I had messed up badly and he only saw it as fun. I could see why he found himself in prison more often than not.

"I let Bill capture me through the mistake of following the others to the Circus," I answered. "It was... terrifying, to say the least."

"The Cirque de Rêves. I know it very well." He rubbed the scruff on his chin. "Morpheus has definitely done a fantastic job being the God of Dreams, or I should say Nightmares. You have to at least give him credit there. None of us realized he was so powerful until it was too late. Hell, none of us even suspected a thing. I should have never let the King and Queen..." he trailed off, staring off at nothing. After a moment he blinked then smiled to me. "So I take it you didn't survive it too well either."

I shook my head. "No, I didn't." I looked down at the water and remembered jumping into it in my mind. The memory would always haunt me now every time I saw the ocean. "Malcolm had to take the shadow out of me."

Kenny nodded. "That boy eats darkness for breakfast, nothing can scare him. That's what makes him such a good warrior, but also one scary-ass villain if he wanted to be."

"How do you know Malcolm?" I asked as I moved away from the window and sat across from him. I was done being reminded of that Circus. I wanted to take my mind off it.

Kenny smiled. "Oh, me and Malcolm? We go way back, and I do mean way back." He started rocking back and forth, as if excited to tell his tale. He acted like a little kid yet he appeared to be in his thirties, and I figured he must be a lot older than that being in Wonderland. "I used to be a knave for the Queen of Hearts, you know, until I stole one of her tarts. Those damn tarts, she didn't eat them, she just let them sit there until they wasted away. It was a disgusting waste of great food. So I ate one and I liked it!"

"Just like the story then..." I was actually quite amused at how that still pissed him off, being so many years ago. I mean, did time still move the same here? If so, then it was over 150 years ago.

He shrugged and scratched the back of his head. "I suppose so. I had a trial and everything. Malcolm was there, he lied for me, said I didn't do it. He was always a trouble maker, even back then. Though more comical than anything. He just hated the injustice of the system and caused the Queen a lot of trouble."

“He doesn’t seem to be a troublemaker now.”

Kenny laughed. “You wouldn’t consider going against the Queen and King of Dreams, bringing you here, and trying to stop the Circus troublemaking?”

He had a point. Although he wasn’t as blatant as Chase, he had caused a lot of disruption in Wonderland. I really hadn’t thought about it that way. No one here saw him as a hero, they all saw him as the enemy. “I guess when you put it that way.”

“He is and always will be a troublemaker. Although he stood up for me, there were others who testified against me, and the Queen found out Malcolm was lying. Although he had caused a lot of trouble, there was never any evidence against him until then. So we were both sentenced to the Dark Forest for life, never to come out again. We shrugged it off, being two young guys that never imagined anything defeating us. So we were dropped in the middle of the forest, in the darkness. The things we saw there...” he trailed off, his eyes becoming dark as if he was gone, lost in his memories for a moment. He came back and smiled. “Let’s just say nothing can scare us after that experience.”

“How long were you there for?”

He shrugged. “Who knows, really. Alice found us, tamed us in a sense, and brought us back. Or at least she tamed me.” His voice became serious, which was strange after talking to him for a bit. I didn’t think he could ever be serious. “Malcolm, on the other hand, was a different story.” He slapped his knees, coming back to his cheery self. “But that is not my story to tell, now is it?”

I wondered what he could have meant by that. Malcolm seemed so nice, but everyone I talked to had known him in the past and say he had lived in darkness. What could that have entailed? I wanted to ask more questions about Malcolm, to get to the answers of what people had been hinting at, but by the sound of it, Kenny wasn’t going to give away any secrets.

“So how did you get thrown in this cell?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s simple. I got caught doing stuff I wasn’t supposed to. I spied on the White Rabbit and let Malcolm know what he was up to. I also did some research in trying to find you. Bill caught me. Good ol’ Bill, he’s always so persistent. Usually I like that about him, it’s sexy. But this is completely different, now he isn’t his usual beautiful self. Have you seen

his face? No, because it's shadowed in darkness. It's a shame, really, he has such a lovely face."

I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that, so I decided to focus on the beginning of his rambling. "So you are the one who found me?"

He grinned. "Yup, did all the research myself. I know your school, where you live, all those paintings you have."

"Umm... That is not something I wanted to know."

His eyes widened. "Sorry, that made me sound like I was a pervert. I'm not a pervert, I was just stalking you."

I shook my head. "That's... Never mind."

"I only did it so we could find the right Alice to help us save this Kingdom. No other reason, believe me, I would never think of doing anything else."

"Well you must have made a mistake, I'm not the Alice you are looking for."

He made an amused face. "Psh! I am never wrong. You are *the* Alice, I should know since I've met the old Alice. You are her and always will be her."

I hated it when people kept saying I was the same Alice as before. She was legendary, much stronger than me as I understood, and then here I was trying to live up to her legacy. "But I am a weakling, I am not strong. There is no way I could battle like her, or bring down any kingdoms whatsoever."

"You would be surprised what you are capable of, just look inside yourself and you will find out."

I shook my head. "I already failed at that, I faced Morpheus and I lost."

"You survived though."

Barely, I thought. The only reason I survived was because the others pulled me out of there, willing to sacrifice everything. I would be gone if it weren't for them. "Because of Malcolm. I didn't want to wake up, I didn't want to leave the place he left me in."

"Well," his eyes became dark. "Then I guess Morpheus has won and Wonderland is no more. Dreams that everyone has in the real world will cease to exist."

He made it sound like it was my decision, that only I could bring peace in Wonderland. That if I gave up, then everything would fail. "You can't place all that on my shoulders."

“Oh, but I can, because you are Alice and Alice shall save Wonderland like she always does.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t like you.”

He simply laughed. “That’s what the old Alice used to say.”

I had a feeling that it was what a lot of people said to him. Although, even though he was a bit obnoxious, he was a pretty nice guy. I felt as if I could open up to him, which was strange for only knowing him for a few moments now. I have never felt like that before about anyone, at least not so fast.

A crash sounded from the other side of the door. Both Kenny and I jumped up to our feet, not sure what was happening. Smoke came pouring from underneath the door and I started coughing. The door swung open to reveal Malcolm. I stared at him, surprised that he had broken in so soon. I guess it was better than waiting for them to increase security.

“Well, why are you staring at me? Let’s go!”

CHAPTER 21

“Malcolm, my ol’ buddy, my pal!” Kenny ran up to him and hugged him like a bear. Malcolm didn’t return the hug but just stood there annoyed. “You came to rescue me at last.”

“I came for Alice and you know that, and we are in a hurry so either stay here or join us in our escape.” Malcolm grabbed my hand. “Let’s go, Alice. We only have so much time.”

Malcolm pulled me into the hallway and handed me a katana. “Here. Figured you lost your other one.”

I took it and strapped it to my side. “Thanks.” Although I didn’t know how much help I could really do with it, as Bill had easily defeated me when I went up against him. Then again, he was one of the best soldiers in the Kingdom, so I couldn’t really compare myself to him.

“Ooo, I do love a good escape.” Kenny ran in front of us, backwards so he could face Malcolm and I. “What do we do next?”

“We escape,” Malcolm answered as a matter of fact.

“Brilliant! Hey, did you get me a sword?”

“No, quite honestly I forgot you were even in here.”

Kenny pouted. “Awe, how can you say that after all the things we’ve been through together?”

“Easily, I just simply put any thought of you in the back of my mind and let it disappear.”

“Because your feelings for me are too great so you had to let yourself forget. I understand now.” Kenny smiled as if he had really believed for a second that was what Malcolm meant.

I turned to Malcolm. “He’s strange, isn’t he?”

Kenny laughed. “That’s what the old Alice used to say as well.”

Nodding to turn, Kenny led the way, running with his knees up way too high to be comfortable. I didn’t even know how to take in the strangeness that was Kenny. It was like taking in every strange anime character I knew and combining them into some eccentric hybrid.

Alarms started ringing, echoing through the basement of the facility. We actually got quite farther than I thought we would before the alarm had

been sounded. I was surprised, but a little worried. Something seemed off to me but I couldn't quite figure out what it was. It was probably just the whole scenario.

As we made it further down the corridors, Kenny stopped and peered around as if looking for something.

"What is it?" Malcolm asked. He seemed actually concerned instead of ignoring him. So he did trust that Kenny knew his stuff. I probably would have ignored him if I were by myself. He seemed to have some weird quirks.

"Where is everyone? There used to be more guards down here," he whispered, his face now serious. How he could change his tune so easily, I had no idea. "There's a trap waiting for us."

Malcolm smiled. "I know, I planned on it. Bill thinks he can outsmart me, but as we all know, he can't."

Kenny laughed. "You always did think ahead. Nothing like me, are you?"

"Wouldn't be alive if I thought like you. How you managed not to be killed by now I have no idea." He started back down the hall. "Now we need to go this way."

Kenny and I followed Malcolm as he led us further through the basement. I didn't understand why we didn't head up. Bill would catch us if we didn't start heading up soon, as that was the only exit to get out of this place, at least that was what I thought. I had no true idea of how this place was even laid out. Malcolm must have had something planned.

"How did you get in here so easily?" I asked.

"It's always easier to sneak into a place than it is sneaking out," Malcolm explained. "Remember that. Besides, I used to live here, remember? I was once the King and Queen's knight in shining armor, so to speak. I never cared for armor, always got in the way."

Kenny added. "That's for sure, a nice leather coat is always so much more practical. That is, until you are shot or stabbed."

"Which is why you just simply don't allow that to happen. You can wear all the armor in the world, but if you go against someone who is better at sword fighting than you, it will be all for nothing. A good offense is always a good defense in this world."

"And you try to say you aren't mad anymore, Malcolm, I think you lie."

Malcolm let out a quiet chuckle. "It's really just common sense, something you lack by far."

"Who needs common sense when you could just be spontaneous?"

"Everyone. Everyone needs common sense. I have no idea why you don't understand that by now."

We rounded the corner to find four guards waiting for us. Malcolm pulled out his rapier in a single swoop and stabbed one of them in the stomach. As quickly as he could, he grabbed the fallen guard's rapier and threw it straight at Kenny's face. I seriously didn't think he was going to catch it and just end up with a sword through his face, but he did, and joined the battle with Malcolm. I pulled out my own sword as one of the guards came at me. I tried to remember all that Chase had taught me. I blocked the few thrusts and slashed my opponent's torso. He fell to the ground along with Malcolm and Kenny's opponent.

"Wow, Malcolm taught you well," Kenny commented.

"I didn't teach her," Malcolm said as he started down the hallway. "Let's keep going."

"Where are the others?" I asked as I ran beside him.

"It is easier for one person to sneak in than a group, that is something else you need to remember. Besides, it's better if they are on the outside in case we get captured again. Then they can rescue us. If they were here and we were all captured, who would rescue us then?"

"Good point."

We came upon a dead end, with nowhere to go but back the way we came. The hall just simply ended. Malcolm stared at it for a couple of seconds and let his lips curl in a smile. It was all part of the plan, I simply wished I knew what that was.

The sound of clapping came from behind us. Turning around, we found Bill and a dozen or so guards trapping us. If I could see Bill's face, I bet it would have been a look of pure satisfaction.

"Good show, Malcolm, good show. But where did you think you were going?" he asked.

"Tracked us the entire time?" Malcolm questioned.

"Of course, who do you think I am? I just waited for you to make a very bad choice, which you did. Now you have nowhere to go."

Kenny stepped forward. “Oh, come on Bill, what are you going to do to us? You wouldn’t hurt me now would you?”

“You’re the first person I want to hurt, Kenny.”

“So *naughty*, I swear. But you don’t mean that, not after all the fun we’ve had together...” Kenny pouted. I really wished Bill didn’t have his face covered in shadows so I could see his response. I felt like there was more to the story between those two but knowing Kenny from these past few minutes, it was really hard to tell.

“Stop talking. You have nowhere to escape, but back into our custody. There is no point in fighting, Malcolm. Just give up so your precious Alice doesn’t get hurt.”

I glanced at Malcolm, who was smiling, not afraid of Bill and the others.

“You so sure about that? That I have nowhere to go?” Malcolm asked.

Kenny examined Malcolm, as if trying to figure out what he was planning. Then a giant smile appeared on his face.

“You, Malcolm, brilliant! You are *brilliant!*”

Bill started for his rapier, but it was too late. Malcolm wrapped one of his arms around me and grabbed Kenny by his jacket with his other hand. Slamming his back into the wall behind us, the paper ripped and down we went towards the ocean.

I screamed, of course, because what else do you do when you are falling to your death? You scream bloody murder. Malcolm kept a firm grasp around me and onto Kenny’s coat. Of course, Kenny laughed the entire time we fell. Malcolm simply closed his eyes, remaining calm as we were falling straight into the roaring ocean about to die. Then, suddenly, out of nowhere, Chase appeared, grabbing Malcolm, and away we went to another part of Wonderland.

CHAPTER 22

I took a couple moments to catch my breath. The air no longer tasted of salt, but of wet moss and pine. We were in a forest now. Peering around I saw the massive pines and oak that shrouded the light from the sky. It almost appeared to be twilight out due to the tree coverage, but I had no idea what time it was. A light fog covered the ground all around us, which always did creep me out. I hated not being able to see the ground, you never knew what you were going to step on, or what was going to grab you. Especially like that episode of *Stargate Atlantis*. I shuddered at the thought. There was a reason I didn't watch scary movies. First off, I lived by a forest. Second, I wanted to be able to sleep at night.

Kenny started clapping his hands. "Oh, that was fun! Can we do that again?"

Malcolm glared at him as he stood up and wiped off the leaves that clung to his clothes. He didn't land as softly as we did, which I had a feeling Chase may have done on purpose. "No."

"You can never have any fun, can you?" Kenny added.

"Not when you're around."

Kenny smiled. "You don't mean that."

Chase stayed seated on the ground, cross-legged, staring at Kenny. "What's he doing here?"

Malcolm finished straightening his tie. "He was locked up with Alice. I told him he could tag along if he wanted. Didn't actually think he would, but I figured if we ran into any trouble I could just throw him at the enemy and save Alice."

Kenny laughed. "Such a joker, I love you Malcolm."

"I wasn't joking."

"Well." Chase leaned his chin on his knuckle. "This changes things."

"But we are all about change, now aren't we?" Kenny spun around, his arms wide open. "That's the beauty of Wonderl—" He stopped, face frowning. "Wait, I know this place."

Malcolm looked at him but didn't say a word. I tried to figure out what was happening, but I also didn't know what was going on. It wasn't like I

could recognize places in Wonderland, except maybe the kingdoms from the stories.

"We are at the entrance to the Dark Forest," Kenny whispered.

My heart felt as if it had skipped a beat. There was no way we would be going into the Dark Forest, was there? I mean, after everything everyone said, it sounded like it would be the worst place to go. *It had to be a joke, right?*

Chase stood up. "Brilliant, Einstein, you figured it out."

Kenny turned to him. "What's an Einstein?"

He put his hand on Kenny's shoulder. "It's an Earth thing, don't worry about it."

The sound of twigs and leaves crunching under running footsteps made us each turn to see what was coming. My heart raced in fear that Bill had followed us. Coming into view, Davis and Melvin appeared, looking beat.

Davis leaned on his knees, panting. "You landed a little off from where we planned. We could see you, though, so we came over."

"Oh, I made you have to run. Sorry pipsqueak," Chase smiled.

"That's not funny!" Davis rebutted.

"It doesn't matter now, we are here," Melvin stopped the cat and mouse from arguing. "And now we have to start moving."

"What's your plan, Malcolm?" Kenny questioned.

Davis looked at him in surprise. "Where did he come from?"

"Answer me, Malcolm, what's your plan?" Kenny repeated. His seriousness was frightening me, especially since it didn't seem like he was the same person.

"We are going through the Dark Forest. You can join us, if you want. Otherwise..." Malcolm pointed. "The exit is that way."

Turning, Malcolm began walking in the direction opposite to where he pointed. I glanced back at Kenny, who just stared at him, then followed along with the rest of the boys.

"That's suicide and you know it!" Kenny called out.

Malcolm didn't even turn to look at him. "At least here I have the advantage, out there Bill can get her, Morpheus can get her. In here we can hide for a while and regroup without anyone bothering us."

"Other than the Jabberwocky and everything else that is crawling through these woods!"

Malcolm was starting to get frustrated, I could see it in his eyes. He didn't like it when others questioned his authority. "Then come and help us fight them. You and I know these woods better than anyone else in Wonderland."

"What would Howard say about all of this?" Kenny yelled after him.

"Howard's dead."

The words hit me like a wall. Although I saw it happen, although I *knew* it had happened, I had hoped that maybe, just maybe, some miracle happened and he was alive. That what I saw wasn't real and he was going to be waiting for us when we escaped.

Kenny ran over and stood in front of Malcolm, making him stop. "What did you say?"

"Howard's dead. Bill attacked the Red and White Kingdom and they killed him," Malcolm explained.

Kenny shook his head. "No, that can't be possible."

Malcolm shoved past him. "Well, it is."

"Then he finally woke up as a butterfly. His dream has come true." Kenny stood there for a long moment, staring at us as we walked into the woods. I didn't particularly want to go, especially if Kenny, of all people, feared going inside, but what choice did I have? It wasn't like I could simply join Kenny without worrying about Morpheus finding us. Hell, this place had to be better than that Circus, nothing could be worse than one's own fears right? As I thought about that, I heard a screeching sound come from deep within the forest. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I agreed with Kenny and wanted to get the hell away from here.

As we kept walking, I could hear Kenny pacing back and forth, the leaves crunching under his shoes. At least, I hoped they were leaves, couldn't really tell with all the mist that seemed to swallow our feet whole.

All of a sudden Kenny appeared next to us. "Fine, I will help, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Everyone became quiet as we pressed further into the Dark Forest. I didn't realize that we hadn't quite entered the forest until now. It had already been so eerie that I couldn't believe it could get worse. It was like a haunted mansion except all outdoors. First off, cobwebs everywhere, the size of yarn. I did not want to see what those spiders looked like. Moss blanketed practically everything in the area, and trees, although thick and

blocked out the sun, were practically leafless and I swore some of them were glaring at me.

The ground was slippery and I really wished I could see where I was walking. I felt as if at any moment I could step into quick sand like in *Princess Bride*. This place was horrible, and quite quiet now that we had gone deeper and deeper. I couldn't stand the silence.

"Have any of you heard of *Princess Bride*?" I asked. "I mean, I just really hope that there's no R.O.U.S., you know, rodents of unusual size?"

Davis gave me the most horrified look I had ever seen. At first, I had no idea why he was looking at me like that, then it hit me.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean... Davis I'm sorry..."

He put his head down, as if ashamed he was a dormouse. I felt like such an ass. He was a rodent in Wonderland and was probably picked on about it and I had just made matters worse. Chase simply laughed.

"Now that was funny, Alice! I didn't know you had it in you."

I really didn't, I wasn't even thinking about it when I said it. I decided to keep my mouth shut for a while and just hope that Davis would forgive me.

As we kept walking, the fog started to clear. I was thankful that I finally could see the ground. This area was covered in grass and flowers were spread out all around. It was quite gorgeous, in a very creepy sort of way.

Out of nowhere, I started to hear voices, of children to be exact, singing. It echoed around me, bouncing off all of the trees, making it so I couldn't figure out the direction it came from. I glanced at the others, wondering if they could hear it or if it was just in my head. None of them seemed to be bothered by it. I tried to ignore it, blaming my mind for making things up. But it kept persisting, the strange lullaby echoing through the forest. I could even see the tall grass and flowers sway to the rhythm.

"What's that singing?" I finally asked, persuaded that I couldn't be the only one hearing it.

"Ignore it, just ignore it. Don't let the words form in your mind," Malcolm warned. "Cover your ears if you need to, but it might not help, you just need to let your mind ignore it."

I nodded, trying my best to ignore the singing, but it was nearly impossible. With every step I took, it got louder and louder, even when I covered my ears with my hands I could still hear it. It was that persistent.

My mind couldn't do it any longer and before I knew it, the voices had gained formation in my head.

"Listen to our song, most majestic one, it's just a little tune, to make anyone swoon. A lullaby just for you, help you sleep most precious Sue," whatever it was sang in an innocent, child-like voice.

My body became tired, weak, as if my energy was being sucked dry. I couldn't think straight, everything started to turn into a blur. How could I become so sleepy at a time like this, it made no sense. But the thought of a soft, comfy bed was too die for. All I wanted to do was curl up with a blanket next to the fire, snow falling outside gently as the smell of cocoa came from the kitchen. It was perfect, something I just wanted to dream about and the more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that if I fell asleep right now, I could enjoy it. I started to collapse on the ground when someone grabbed me.

"Up we go." Kenny pulled me up on his back to carry me. I didn't resist but simply rested my head on his shoulder. "Don't fall asleep, never fall asleep with that disastrous tune in your head. Bloody flowers, such a nuisance to anyone and everyone. They don't care about anything except for their next meal."

My eyelids drooped but I tried my hardest to fight it. In between my slow blinking, I saw them, flowers rocking back and forth. Daffodils, roses, tiger lilies. They were all singing, they were the ones trying to make us fall asleep. Why we didn't just bypass them, I didn't know. Maybe there was no way around them, I didn't know. My mind couldn't think in a straight line, but I knew I had to try my best to stay alert, just in case.

The sound slowly died away as we moved further and further into the forest. My strength started to come back to me at last, and I felt strong enough to be able to walk. None of the others seemed to be phased by the flowers, which made me feel a bit weak in contrast. I wasn't used to this place, though, it wasn't like there was anything in the real world that I could have any practice with. I slapped Kenny on the side of the shoulder to let him know I was awake and ready to be let down. He set me down on the ground.

"What the hell was that?" I asked as I stretched. Energy was slowly coming back and it felt great.

"The Garden of Live Flowers," Malcolm answered.

“Which means what?”

“Which means,” Chase said. “That they are living beings that feed off anything that they find. They get their victims to lay on the ground and fall asleep, then they wrap their roots around you and suck the life out of your body. Your blood becomes their juice and everything else their food in a sense. Most of them have been destroyed in Wonderland, except in the Dark Forest. No one wants to deal with the things here so most people try and avoid the area. They must have been real hungry because they weren’t trying to hide the fact that they were there.”

They sounded grotesque. I couldn’t imagine a plant doing such things. They were supposed to be such lovely things, not creatures that killed for food. Well, except for the Venus flytrap, but that was different. Well, it wasn’t, it was just like that but at a bigger scale.

“Why didn’t we just go around them?”

“Because there isn’t a way around them. They are essentially the wall that keeps people out of the Dark Forest. They are just the beginning of all the horrible things this forest contains. They don’t let anything in, but neither do they let anything out,” Malcolm explained. “That is, unless you are used to their lullaby.”

I didn’t want to think of what worse things there could be in this forest. The more we strode further into the forest, the more I wondered if the Circus was indeed safer.

“So does that mean you all are used to the song? How is that?” I asked.

No one answered, but each of them glanced at Malcolm. Bill was the only who smiled. “Simple for me, really, I used to listen to their song for fun when I was exiled out here, hoping for a good night’s sleep. Even uprooted one and planted it in my room, didn’t I Malcolm? Those were the good ol’ days when we didn’t have to worry about any rules or nothin’. But I guess it’s better this way, having a sane mind and all.”

“You are everything but sane, Knave,” Chase commented. “And the Mad Hatter here has never lost his name.”

Malcolm shot Chase a look and before they began their never-ending argument, I decided to intervene. “How do we know Bill won’t follow us?”

“Because, this place is too dangerous, even for him,” Melvin explained.

“But what about the portal? Why didn’t they just use that?”

“It would have been very tricky for him to open a portal in midair where if he messed up, he would crash into the ocean below,” Malcolm explained. “We actually planned it out, instead of just going on a whim and getting captured.” Malcolm eyed Chase. I had forgotten, Chase was the one who grabbed me and put me up in the tree where Bill had found me. I didn’t blame Chase, there was no way Bill should have been able to find the right portal, yet somehow he did.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Chase argued.

Malcolm stopped and turned around to face Chase. “What do you mean it wasn’t your fault? We had a plan and you didn’t stick to it!”

“If we stuck to the plan, we would have all been dead and Alice would have still been captured!” Chase retaliated.

Malcolm jabbed at Chase’s collarbone. “If you didn’t bring Alice to the Circus in the first place, we wouldn’t have needed a plan! Because of you and your big mouth, Howard is dead!”

Kenny held out his hand. “Malcolm, calm down. It isn’t that bad. Just calm down.”

“I would be calm if this cat didn’t always screw things up for us.”

Chase frowned and the two boys glared at each other for a moment.

Chase shook his head and turned away from Malcolm. “Fine, I can tell that I’m not wanted. You don’t need me anyway, this is your turf, not mine, *Mad Hatter*.”

He turned and started into the forest, running away from the group. I watched in horror, as he would be all alone in the Dark Forest, a place where horrors simply awaited us all. I knew Chase was mad, but it was an idiotic reason to split from the group.

I glanced to Malcolm. “You can’t let him just run off like that.”

“I can’t?” he sarcastically replied.

I shook my head. “No, because friends don’t leave other friends behind.” I started after him.

“No, Alice, wait!” Malcolm called after but it was too late. I was already out of sight from them, as I headed after Chase.

CHAPTER 23

I regretted running off from Malcolm and the others, but Chase was a friend and I really believed that friends never turned their back on one another. Even if he messed up, it wasn't a reason to completely kick him out of the group, especially when he was trying to do what he thought was right. Besides, they always tried to help me, it was my turn to return the favor.

I pushed through the scraggly branches, the sharp edges hooking on my clothes and ripping them. Blood stained areas where my skin got caught as well and I grimaced, hoping that none of them were poisonous. It was an afterthought, really, so from then on I made sure none dug into my skin. I kept going on further, pushing myself further and further into the woods. There was no turning back now.

Especially since I didn't know the way I had come.

Even though I had run straight after him, I still didn't see any sign of Chase. There were no more singing plants, which I was thankful for, but the fog seemed to have grown thicker and thicker as I went on. Moisture began to form on my hands, reminding me of a dark moonless night I had gotten lost in when I was younger. I heard croaking of frogs around me but had no idea from what direction they came. The trees bounced every noise off of them, making everything seem to come from every which way.

Just like home.

I was glad Wonderland wasn't in a desert because I don't think I would have known how to handle that. No trees, and only sun and sand forever. No, all of those things were foreign to me, especially the sun. Being almost through October, that wasn't something I was going to see for another five or six months. At least, in the real world. Here, on the other hand, was a different story. The sun existed, somewhere above me, I just had to get out of these woods and I would see it.

At least I hoped there was a way out.

Coming upon what appeared to be a clearing, I stepped out onto soft grass, at least I hoped it was grass. It was mushy like grass was in fog, but since the mist covered everything on the ground, I really wasn't sure.

When I got to the clearing I saw a rectangular figure covered in moss and blue-star-creeper. I looked up in the sky, or where there should have been sky as branches still covered the sky. Curious what the rectangle was, I got closer until I realized it was a table, or at least an object that used to be a table.

“What’s a table doing way out here?” I mumbled under my breath. Even when I was alone I couldn’t stand silence and mumbled to myself. Yes, I was a freak, but I honestly accepted it.

I touched the moss, the fuzz tickling my fingers. In random spots, there were hard bumps underneath. I stuck my finger deeper into the moss, which in retrospect could have been bad, and pulled the item out from underneath the table. It was half a tea cup.

I gasped. “This is...”

I dug for another item. A teapot. A spoon. A plate.

“The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party. This is where the original Alice first met Malcolm.”

I glanced around again. This wasn’t the happy scene that was told in the story. No, this was dark and dank. Question was, had it always been this way? And if so, what exactly went on at these tea parties? I wouldn’t think tea would be easy to come by way out here, especially if Malcolm never bothered to leave this place until Alice came around.

I set the items back down on the table and laughed. I couldn’t believe what I had found. If only Malcolm were here, I could ask him more questions about what really happened, if he would even answer my questions. Thinking of Malcolm reminded me that I was lost, looking for Chase.

As I began to move back towards the forest, I felt something brush up against my leg. Stopping, I looked down. I couldn’t see anything. *Damn mist.*

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my beating heart down. “It’s all right, just a leaf or something. Nothing to be afraid of.”

Then again something went past my leg. All of a sudden I was pulled down onto the ground. All I could see was white.

“Come, walk into my parlor,” a voice whispered into my ear. It didn’t sound earthly, but something of a screeching nature.

“Who are you? What are you?” I asked, trying to see if I could get a good look of what ever it was.

The creature stepped forward, closer, with its eight red glowing eyes staring at me. It was a spider. A frigging huge spider. “Will you come, will you?”

I shrieked as I scrambled to get back up. The worse scene in all of *The Lord of the Rings* and I was going to be living it. *Why was I so unlucky all of a sudden?*

“No, no, don’t go, you must come and see. You must come into my parlor,” One of its eight legs brought me back down.

“I don’t want to see your parlor!” I yelled. “I want out of here!”

“Oh, but you must! You must! It is the nicest parlor you ever did see!”

“No!” I kicked and kicked but I could not get loose from the spider’s grasp. It spat out white webbing, encasing me in the yarn-like material that seemed stronger than steel. I struggled and tried to reach for my katana but I couldn’t move my arms. I was trapped. As it wrapped me around and around with sticky webbing, I screamed for help. Now I knew how Frodo felt, but for some reason that wasn’t a reassuring thought whatsoever.

“I have so many curious things to show you my dear—” It began when suddenly the creature let out a petrifying scream. It backed off of me and screamed again. Firm arms helped me up. Once I was out of the fog, I could see my rescuer’s face.

“Chase, thank God!”

He helped pull the webbing off of me, slashing it with his knife. “What are you doing here?”

I took in a few deep breaths, still frightened about the spider. “I came looking for you.”

“How could you be so stupid to separate from the others?” He exclaimed, serious fear in his eyes. Had he really been that worried about me?

I frowned, mad at the attitude he was giving me after I came to help him. “I could ask the same about you.”

“But I have lived in these woods before, you have not. I know what to look out for.” He pointed into the fog. “Like those spiders.”

I shivered at the thought of that spider. “Thank you for saving me.”

“I’m just glad you are all right, otherwise I probably would have been blamed.” He sat up on the table. “Just like with everything else.”

I sat next to him. “It’s not your fault.”

“Malcolm sure thinks so, and Davis and Melvin probably agree. I screwed up. I shouldn’t have told you about us going to the Circus.”

I placed my hand on his back. “It’s all right, you knew I had the right to know. It was my choice, I should have been smarter and not followed you. Or stronger and not let Morpheus get in my head.”

He shook his head. “No, there was no way you were prepared for that. We should have known.”

We were quiet for a moment, the croak of frogs echoing around us.

“How did you, well, you know, not let him into your mind?” I asked.

Chase looked up, as if he was staring at the sky except all there was were trees. “I’m not afraid of anything, I guess. I have always been alone, going from place to place. I guess he just didn’t have anything to confront me on.”

“You aren’t afraid of being alone?”

He shook his head. “Not really. You get used to it, after a while. It has been a long time since I had any real friends or anything. But it has taught me how to live for myself, do the things I want to do.”

“Well, I know I couldn’t be okay with being alone. I hate it, actually, it feels like no one will be there to catch me when I fall.”

“That is why you learn to land on your own feet. You can’t only rely on others so much, and while it is great to have people around you to support you, it is up to you to make the final effort to stand tall. That is what I have learned and what I live by.”

I stared at him for a moment, trying to take in what he said. I understood, in a way, where he was coming from. It was important to be able to stand up for one’s self, but it was also important to surround yourself with those who will make you stronger. It was all about balance. “You’re lucky, not to have any fears.”

He shrugged. “It’s not that hard, really. Just don’t let anything bother you. Know what’s supposed to happen is going to happen and just wish for the best.”

“If only life were really that simple.”

“You make life what you want it.” He turned to face me. “And I know what I want.”

There was a long pause where neither of us said a word. I finally turned away and looked down at my hands. It seemed like the only thing to do, especially since I could feel my cheeks starting to turn red.

“There you two are,” a voice called at us. I looked up to find Malcolm and the others walking towards us. “I was beginning to worry.”

Chase looked like he wanted to say something else to me, but only stood back up and held out his hand to help me. I dusted off the moss from my clothes.

“What is this place?” I asked Malcolm, hoping he would answer truthfully. I mean, it was obvious this was the infamous tea party from the books.

Malcolm stared at the table for a moment, as if he was somewhere else. After a few moments, he blinked. “Beats me.”

I knew he was lying, I could see it in his eyes. I glanced over at Melvin and Kenny, who just stared at Malcolm. They knew the truth but no one was going to spoil any secrets. It wasn’t fair, I hated being left out of the conversation.

“Now, let’s go. We need to find somewhere we can stay before it gets dark.” Malcolm started for the way he came.

“This isn’t dark?” I questioned as I hurried to his side, glancing all around.

“If you think this is dark, just wait until night comes.”

I looked up at the trees. I didn’t want to know what kind of creatures would come out then.

CHAPTER 24

After what felt like an hour of walking, Malcolm stopped in front of a boulder that was at least the size of him, if not taller.

“Kenny and Melvin, give me a hand,” Malcolm started pushing the boulder aside. I couldn’t believe they would be able to move something so large. After their help, it started to budge and I gasped. Was it just lighter weight than ones in my world, or were they really that strong? As it moved, it revealed a dark cave. How the hell he knew it was there, I had no idea. He must have come across it before. Malcolm looked inside for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, this is just how I left it. Doesn’t look like anyone has been here after I left.”

“We are going to stay in there?” Chase questioned as he too looked inside. “It’s pitch black. I mean, I can see everything fine but the rest of you can’t see a thing.”

“Which is why we are going to find some trisings.” Malcolm pulled out a vial from his pocket and tossed it to Davis. “Go find us some.”

“Why do I have to do it?” Davis frowned as he examined the bottle.

“If you are so scared, then take the cat with you.” Malcolm gestured with his hand. “Now go before it gets too dark.”

“Fine.” Davis started back into the woods. “Come on cat.”

Chase reluctantly left with him, rolling his eyes about the task.

“What do we do now?” Melvin asked Malcolm.

Malcolm sat down on a tree stump. “We wait for them.”

“I know! Let’s play a game!” Kenny clapped his hands together. “Let’s play twenty-questions. Okay, I’m thinking of a person, place, or thing.”

“Alice,” Malcolm said.

A look of disappointment appeared on Kenny’s face. “That’s not fair, how did you know?”

“You’re a very predictable person, Kenny, just face it.”

I laughed. I couldn’t believe that he would pick me for the game, and the fact that Malcolm knew exactly what he was going to pick was even more amusing.

Kenny plopped down on the ground. "All right, mister hotshot, it's your turn."

Malcolm rubbed his chin for a moment. "Fine. I have one."

"Is it a person, place, or thing?" I asked, wanting to join in on the game. It was one of my favorite games to play on long car rides after all.

"Thing."

"Is it round?" Melvin asked.

"No."

"Is it large?" Kenny questioned.

Malcolm thought for a moment. "Not large, but not small. Moderate size."

"Can you take it with you?" Melvin asked.

"You could, but it wouldn't be practical."

"Is there one in these woods?" I asked. I still had no idea what it could be at this point, but I was trying to eliminate anything around us.

"Theoretically there could be one in *these* woods, but usually they aren't found in a forest if that is what you are asking."

Kenny scratched the scruff on his chin. "Is it heavy?"

"It can be, or it can be light."

"Is it something that can be found in both the real world and Wonderland?" I asked. This was getting intense, as I was that weird person who always had to figure out what a person was thinking for this game.

"Good question. It can be found in both."

"Does it have practical use?" Melvin asked.

"Yes."

"Do people use it on a daily basis?" I asked.

"Mostly, yes."

"Oh oh! I know," Kenny jumped up and down. "Is it a toilet?"

I hit my head with my palm. Did he really think that Malcolm would pick that? He had so much more class than that.

"No."

See, I was right.

"Damn," Kenny whispered.

"Do you sit on it?" I asked.

"It's purpose isn't to be sat on," he answered. He was particular with his answer, that meant we were getting closer.

“Is it flat?” Melvin asked.

Malcolm nodded. “Yes.

“Is it a table?” Melvin asked.

“Not quite.”

“Oh, oh!” Kenny shouted.

“Is it a desk?” I asked.

Malcolm smiled. “Yes. Good job.”

“Hey, I was going to say that.” Kenny frowned.

I stuck my tongue out at him and laughed.

“It’s your turn, Alice,” Malcolm said.

I thought for a moment, then smiled. “All right, I got it!”

“Person, place, or thing?” Melvin questioned.

“Thing,” I answered.

“Paint brush,” Malcolm said.

I frowned. I hadn’t even thought of it until they asked me what I should pick, how in the world could he have known that. It also was no fun when someone could always guess what the other person was thinking, as he had done to Kenny as well. “How did you know?”

Malcolm laughed. “You all are so predictable.”

“Found them!” Davis appeared with Chase at his side, his arms still crossed, not happy that he got sent on a task with Davis. Davis held up a jar, looking a bit scratched up. I wondered what had happened for him to look like that.

“Have any trouble?” Malcolm took the jar from him.

Davis gave him a look. “Seriously? You going to ask me that?”

Malcolm chuckled as he took the jar into the cave. All of a sudden, the jar began to light up. I gasped. Inside the jar were little figures, people almost, like fairies.

“Fairies,” I whispered. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing, did they actually exist?

“They are called trisings,” Kenny explained as he examined them closely and tapped the glass. The trisings jumped back from where his finger hit the glass. “Sort of like a fairy, but smaller and they only come out at night. More like fireflies but can last through the entire night. Really hard to catch.”

“What is Malcolm using them for?” I asked.

“To light up the cave, of course. It’s not safe to be anywhere in this forest without some kind of light.”

“Oh.” I forgot that it was supposed to be getting dark soon, as the woods itself seemed dark already. I just hoped the light coming off these creatures would be enough.

“The creatures that come out at night are far worse than anything in the day,” Malcolm said as he had overheard our conversation. “So you never want to be without light. It scares them off.” He sat the jar down and looked at the beings inside. “I just need you for a night. In the morning, I will let you go.”

The creature pounded its tiny fists against the glass, mouth moving as if it were yelling obscenities. I couldn’t hear anything though, either they were too quiet or the jar had interfered.

Malcolm stood up and turned to the rest of us. “We will take turns keeping watch. I will take first round. Everyone else, get as much rest as you can. You will need it.”

I peered around to only find rock around me. Since Malcolm acted like he used to stay here when he lived in the forest, I figured it would have a little more to it. I was wrong, it was just like any other cave one would find. I sighed, knowing that there was no way I would be able to sleep tonight. What did one have to do to get some good sleep in Wonderland?

Oh, that’s right, destroy the Circus.

CHAPTER 25

Tink. Tink. Tink.

I opened my eyes to see the little trising flying into the glass bottle. It tried so desperately to get out.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

I felt sorry for it, a helpless little being trapped in such a small space. I wondered what its life was like, living in this forest, being so small. Malcolm had said they only come out at night. How did it survive with all the horrible creatures that Kenny mentioned? Was it just because it let off light that all the other creatures didn't bother it?

Malcolm was next to the trising, staring at the little creature. He looked as if he were in another place, staring off into the memories of his past. He used to live here and after what I had seen, I wondered how he could have survived so long, and what all he could have seen when he resided here.

"Is there something on my face?" he whispered.

I blinked. "What?"

"You keep staring at me. I thought maybe I had something on my face."

"Oh," I blushed. "You looked deep in thought and I was just wondering what you could have been thinking about."

He gestured to come sit up next to him. I hesitated but decided if I sat next to him, then we wouldn't wake anyone while trying to talk across the cave.

"I was thinking of what to do next," he whispered.

"And?" I asked.

"And I don't know. We can't stay in here forever, it's too dangerous. If we leave, we will probably be captured by Bill. We need to face Morpheus, but..." he trailed off.

"But I'm not ready for it?" I finished. It was exactly what I was thinking as well, and honestly I didn't know how I would ever be ready. I wasn't strong enough to face my fears, I was just a kid in high school. How could I do anything to face my fears?

"It's not your fault, nothing in your world would have prepared you for this. You don't have people that can get into your mind like him."

I didn't think that was the truth, it was more than just that. "I know I'm weak, Malcolm, you don't have to sugarcoat it."

He shook his head. "No, even the strong fall under Morpheus' influence. He has most of Wonderland under his thumb. It has nothing to do with being weak."

Tink. Tink. Tink.

I looked down at the little creature. It was trying its hardest to get out of the little cell it found itself in. "I feel sorry for it."

Malcolm let out a slight laugh. "Why?"

"Because it's in this scary world and it is so small."

"Trisings are monsters, demons really."

I looked at him puzzled. "But it's so small."

He pointed at it. "Look at it, do you see its fangs and claws? You think that kind of body is meant for sweetness?"

I looked closer. He was right, instead of fingers, there were long claws and as I brought my face closer, it opened its mouth as if it was hissing at me. Its mouth was full of sharp teeth, just like a shark's.

"Ew!" I backed away.

"You don't want to come across one of these in the middle of the night. They will tear your skin right off."

"That's morbid," I said.

He shrugged. "That's the Dark Forest. Everything here is morbid."

We sat in silence and I imagined all the things that could be out there, waiting to kill us. Kenny had said that the creatures wouldn't come into the light. So, I figured, the light was safe, other than the light that was really a small, pixie-like monster that could kill me. I tried not to think about that. *Stay positive, I told myself, you will get through this. You have a bunch of friends who would protect you.*

I glanced over at Malcolm, whose blinking seemed to get slower and slower. He was tired, especially after everything that had happened. Hell, he probably slept less than I had in the past few days.

"You can go sleep, if you want. I will keep watch," I said straightening up as if I wasn't tired. Truthfully, I was.

He shook his head. "No, it's fine. You should sleep."

"If you want to protect me, then you need your strength. Go sleep."

He smiled. "Well, when you put it that way."

Moving over to what I guess was a comfier spot, which seemed unlikely since everything was rock, he lay down and stared up at the ceiling. "If you need anything, just wake me up. Even if it's just to talk."

"Go to sleep already."

I watched as he shut his eyes. I kept an eye on him for a few moments before I decided he really was trying to sleep. Bringing my knees close to me, I leaned my head on them and watched the trising trying to escape the jar.

Time passed as the others slept. I heard a few mumbles, as if someone was waking up, but whoever it was would just roll over and fall back asleep. Mainly that was Kenny, he was a very active sleeper, which didn't surprise me in the least.

"The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts, all on a summer day; The Knave of Hearts, he stole those tarts, and took them quite away," Kenny whimpered in his sleep. He was telling his story. Again.

They were tired, we were all tired. They put their lives on the line for me and I wasn't going to wake them up from a sleep they all desperately needed.

"Alice ate the tarts, I swear," Kenny went on. I frowned. Well maybe I would wake him up if I needed to. It was quite tempting, but he was loud and would probably wake the others.

It was strange, though, that I wasn't cold in this cave. In the movies, if a person had to camp out in a cave it always looked cold, but not here. It was always warm in Wonderland, which I was thankful for. There could be some slight chills, but that was it. It may have been moist in this forest, but at least I didn't have to suffer the coldness. Even being from Oregon, I hated the cold as much as someone from Arizona or something. It was just so... miserable.

"Alice..." a voice called out from the distance. I had no idea who it was or where it was coming from.

I jolted up. "Who's there?"

The sound of a little girl laughing surrounded me. I just hoped it wasn't those flowers again. Or something worse. I glanced over at Malcolm, wondering if I should wake him up or not.

"You ask *far* too many questions, you are definitely Alice."

The voice sounded like a little girl. I looked around but saw no sign of whoever, or whatever, it was.

“Who or what are you?” I called out in a whisper.

“Silly Alice, can’t you tell? I’m you.” A form began to appear in front of me. It was me, or at least me when I was younger. Blonde hair in pigtails, a little blue dress, black shoes. I remembered that outfit, it was for the first day of kindergarten.

“That’s not possible,” I whispered. Well, it probably was, this was Wonderland after all.

She turned around and started skipping to the entrance of the cave. “Come on Alice, we can go play. Don’t you want to go play?”

“No, wait!” I ran after her into the darkness. Before I realized it, I was out of the cave. *Shit*. I spun around to find that I had already become lost. I couldn’t see the entrance any longer.

“Crap, crap, crap!” I hurried back the way I thought I had come to find nothing. “They’re going to kill me,” I gulped. “If something out here doesn’t do that first.”

The girl laughed. “Silly Alice, where are you going?”

“I want to go back to where I was,” I answered, as if the little version of me was real.

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because that is where my friends are.”

“You don’t need them, I will be your friend.”

Suddenly blue lights appeared on the ground, making a path. They twinkled in the darkness, only lighting up little parts of the path.

“This is the way you need to go Alice, Come on! Let’s play!” She appeared once more in the path, running and laughing.

I started after her. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Just trust in your friends, Alice, they will know where to take you. This way!” She giggled as she skipped.

More and more lights lit up before me. I couldn’t see anything but the blue lights, like little bell-shaped figures. Not trees, no stars, no plants, no creatures trying to kill me. Just the little blue lights and me as a little girl.

I hurried after her, but the faster I went, the farther she seemed from me. I had no idea what was going on and I just wanted to be back with the others but I had no idea where that was anymore. It was pitch black other

than the blue lights, and with the little girl looking like me, I had to know what it was and how it could do that. I still had my katana on me, I knew I would be fine. At least, I hoped.

“That’s it, come on Alice!”

The next step I took, I felt the rock give out. I screamed as I fell down. Quickly, I grabbed the ledge and held on with all my might. The blue lights kept on, but I could now tell that below them was nothing. I was on the edge of a cliff and the only things below me was the never ending pit of darkness.

“Let go Alice, you never will know what’s down there if you don’t let go.”

“Are you crazy, I will die!” I exclaimed, my arm feeling as if it going to give out. Why had I been so foolish to think that the girl would lead me to somewhere I needed to go?

“So?” she giggled.

I tried to pull myself up, but I felt the edge I was holding onto start to give away a little. I screamed as the dirt began to move under my hand.

Something grasped my arm and I was forced back up onto the ledge. It was Malcolm.

“How did you?” I began after he pulled me fully up on the safe ground.

He panted, out of breath. “I woke up and you were gone. Then I saw the blue lights and followed them.”

I wrapped my arms around him. “Thank you. You saved me.” I realized how close I was and backed up away from him, I was a little embarrassed by that action.

“Don’t ever do that again.” He turned back the way he came. “We better hurry back before the lights disappear.”

“It was me,” I whispered.

“What?”

“The little girl, she was me. She brought me out here.”

“It was probably a trickster, they will make you see what they want you to see. Then, as I found out, will send you over the edge.”

I shook my head. “No, it was trying to tell me something.”

“Tell you something?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I smiled. “And I know exactly what we need to do now to take down the Circus.”

CHAPTER 26

We were able to return to the cave before the blue lights completely disappeared. As we hurried back, I could still hear the little girl, the younger version of me, laughing and giggling. Nothing was worse than hearing one's self, especially when they were younger. And especially when the apparition appeared right in front of one's self. It was creepy, actually, and I wished that it never would happen again.

But at least now I knew what I needed to do in order to defeat Morpheus. And it had been in front of me this entire time.

Malcolm and I sat back down next to the trising. It was apparent that he wasn't going to go back to sleep anytime soon. I wondered how much longer we had before it would be light out, or at least lighter.

All the others were still asleep, Kenny snoring away. I bet an earthquake could happen and he still would be asleep.

"What do you mean you know what we need to do next?" Malcolm whispered.

"Against Morpheus," I said. "I know how to beat him."

He shook his head. "How? How do you think you can beat him when just a little bit ago, you didn't even know what to do?"

"Alice showed me what I need to do."

"Alice?" He frowned. "You mean that trickster? They will tell you anything to kill you."

"Exactly, so we need to go to the Circus as fast as we can. How do we get out of here?" I asked.

"We aren't going to the Circus," he stated.

I looked at him in bewilderment, thinking at first he was joking. He wasn't. "Excuse me?"

"I am not taking you there, I'm not risking it." He acted as if his decision was the only one that mattered.

I glared at him. "It's not your choice, Malcolm. We are going."

"Not without my help you aren't, you have no idea where these woods will lead you."

I moved closer to him. "Then help me, we have to beat Morpheus before it's too late."

He shook his head. "I don't want to put you through that again."

"It's not up to you, it's up to me. I know what I'm up against now and I know what to do," I said sternly.

"And what's that?" he questioned, his voice a bit louder.

"If I told you, then Morpheus will figure it out. I can't risk telling you, it will ruin the element of surprise."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "How am I supposed to help you if you don't tell me what I need to do!"

"Just trust me, you will know when the time comes!" I exclaimed. I hated being told what to do, and was good at talking back. At least, that is what my parents always said.

"You two sound like a married couple," Kenny yawned.

We both spun around to face him. "Do not!"

Kenny shrugged. "Whatever you say."

"She's being unreasonable, she thinks she can face Morpheus now, out of the blue," he said to Kenny.

I turned to him. "I'm right here, why are you telling him like I'm not here?"

"Because you aren't listening to me!" he answered back. Now he was starting to get on my nerves. I didn't understand why he couldn't just trust me, I knew what I was doing now. I finally figured it out.

"What's going on?" a drowsy Davis started to get up. "Why is there yelling?"

"They are having a couple's spout." Kenny smiled.

We both glared at him. "We aren't a couple!"

He raised his arms in defense. "All right, all right. Just keep telling yourself that." He started to stand. "But it is strange that you want to go to the Circus all of a sudden."

"A trickster led her out in the dark last night." Malcolm stood up and stretched. "It tried to lead her off a cliff. Fortunately, I arrived before she lost her grip of the edge."

"A trickster? Are you sure?" Kenny asked.

"Yes," Malcolm answered.

“No, it was Alice. She was trying to show me how to beat Morpheus,” I said. Everyone just stared at me.

“What did you say?” Chase was now up. “Alice?”

“The original Alice came to me to show me how to beat Morpheus,” I repeated. “Well, I think it was the original Alice, but appeared like me when I was a little girl. Either way she showed me what to do.”

“But she won’t clue us in on exactly what that is,” Malcolm added. “We just have to follow her lead, and trust that this apparition is real.”

Melvin yawned. “So are we going back there then?”

Malcolm and I locked eyes. I didn’t turn away but held my own. I was going to win this fight and then I was going to win the fight against Morpheus.

He sighed and rubbed his face. “It’s not a good idea.”

“It’s the only way to save Wonderland,” I added. “This is the only way we are going to win.”

Kenny stepped next to Malcolm and whispered something into his ear. Whatever it was, it made Malcolm even more angry, his eyes narrowing and hands clenching. He glared at Kenny for a moment, but then looked defeated.

Malcolm sighed. “Fine, we will go.”

I smiled in satisfaction. “Now, how do we get out of here?”

“That will be the tricky part. We can’t take a short cut out to just make a portal there because Bill will find us and follow us. We can’t make a portal out of here because the forest won’t allow it. The only way to get out of here is to go through the heart of the Dark Forest and out the other side where the Circus is located,” he explained.

“How long will that take us?” I asked.

“At least three days, if we don’t run into any trouble,” Kenny answered for him.

“So two more nights in this wretched place?” Davis groaned. “I want a real bed.”

Chase stood up. He hadn’t said a word about the Circus and whether or not he agreed about going. I wondered what his thoughts were about it all. “Sun is rising, we should start moving now if we want to get out of here then.”

I looked at the cave door and saw light, if you could really call it light, beginning to shine. It really was just not-as-dark-as-pitch-black light, but at least we could see each other out there. Malcolm grabbed the bottle with the trising.

“Well then, shall we?”

CHAPTER 27

We walked as fast as we could through the forest, trying to reach the other side. My heart pounded in my chest as trees around us cracked and moaned. I had just watched *Lord of the Rings* last weekend and I became paranoid that the trees were going to get up and attack us, even though the Ents aren't evil. In the real world, that would have been a silly notion, but here, anything was possible. And the fact a spider had tried to eat me the day before...

Letting the trising go was scary to experience. It wasn't completely light out and it apparently didn't appreciate us capturing it for the night. The moment Malcolm let it out of the bottle, it attacked him and Kenny. I'll forever remember the sound of Kenny screaming. Never before had I heard a grown man scream like a little girl. Now the two of them have bite and scratch marks all over their arms. We must have run at least two miles before it was light enough for the creature to have to hide. It couldn't handle sunlight, which made sense to me. Creatures of Satan always hated sunlight in the movies.

After running for our lives, we got some food. I was very hesitant to eat it, after everything that I had experienced here, but Kenny and Malcolm reassured me again and again that it was okay, that they knew what was poisonous and what was not. I finally gave in, my stomach demanding something to eat.

What really concerned me was the random little signs planted into the ground next to berries and plants that said 'eat me' and 'pick me', etc. First off, who the hell posted those? Second, like hell am I going to believe those signs. I didn't believe anything in this forest and I never wanted to come back. Ever.

Which probably meant, for some unforeseen reason, I would be back. That is, if we got out of here in one piece.

A few hours passed and we now found ourselves nearing the heart of the forest. The trees seemed to be getting denser, more creatures growling around us, and even more fog to worsen our vision. I stayed close to

Malcolm, since he knew where he was going, and everyone else stayed close behind.

Melvin had his saber out, chopping down twigs and ivy so that we could pass. His arm had to have been getting sore after all the things he had to get rid of in our way. Davis switched out with him after a while, his claymore slicing right through everything just as the saber did.

A howling noise started echoing around us and Malcolm took my hand to secure me next to him. I felt safe near him, and closer after our fight. Even though I denied being a couple to Kenny, I really thought about the possibility. He had always been there for me, and I had a big crush on him in the real world. But here he was different, here he was cold.

Or was that just a mask so no one could hurt him?

Then there was Chase. I enjoyed being with Chase, he was a good friend, but that is all I felt for him. Friendship. He was someone I could trust to be there, even though together we ended up being trouble. What he felt towards me, I wasn't quite sure. It was all so complicated and not something I wanted to think about when first we had to take down the Circus.

We stopped for a break. Melvin tapped a tree and got us all some water. Never did I feel so thirsty in all my life. Kenny grabbed some fruit and leaves which he said were edible. I hoped he was right, but trusted him after he found food for us earlier that didn't make me ill. We all ate our share and let our bodies restore their energy.

"How long did you two live out here?" I asked as we rested for a bit.

Kenny shrugged. "Oh, what, probably at least fifty years, give or take a few."

I gasped. "Fifty years?" That seemed impossible, to have survived in a place like this for so long. I could barely handle the one day we were out here. They were strong and smart, I had to give them that.

"That's what happens when you go up against the Queen of Hearts," Chase explained. "She either cuts off your head or exiles you here."

"Did you get exiled here too?" I asked.

Chase laughed. "The Queen could never catch me. I came here on my own sometimes. Get away from people. That's when I met Alice, she wandered in here on her own, looking for a path."

I turned to the others. "What about Melvin and Davis, how did you meet Alice?"

Davis started to open his mouth but didn't say anything.

"We were here as well, yes, we all met her here," Melvin answered.

"You were here in exile as well?"

"Yes, but not for that long. We had only been in here for a week or two," Melvin said.

"So maybe this forest is the key to beating Morpheus," I smiled.

"We just have to get out of here alive first," Davis whispered.

"Shouldn't be hard, you did it last time," I said.

"Yeah," Davis glanced at Malcolm and Kenny. "Barely."

I thought about furthering the conversation and asking what he meant by barely, but I decided I didn't want to know. Between Malcolm and Kenny's dour faces, I knew it wasn't a topic they wanted to press any further. I would figure it out someday, though, if I had the chance.

After a few more minutes of silent rest, we started up again. The tension seemed to grow between the guys. Memories, I presume, from the last time they were here were coming back to them. No one said a word, but I could feel it and see it in the way they looked at each other.

Chase pulled me towards the back next to him as we made our way up a hill.

"Why are you sticking so close to him?" he asked.

I blinked, surprised at the question. It had come out of nowhere. "Because he knows this place the best."

"That's it?"

I nodded.

"Just be careful, alright? You don't realize how this place can affect a person. It may have been a long time ago, but Malcolm and Kenny used to rule these woods."

"What do you mean by rule?" I asked.

He started to say something but out of the darkness a loud roar rang through the trees. I spun forward to see one of the strangest creatures I had ever seen come out of the trees before us. Its head was round with large eyes and teeth that belonged on a tiger. Its long neck ran down to its round body and even longer tail. It had massive arms with claws that extended out

towards us. Its dragon-like wings flapped vigorously to keep its body up off the ground.

It let out another roar.

Everyone pulled out their swords, even me. The beast charged at us and everyone jumped out of the way. It screamed as Davis slashed it with his claymore. Angry, it grabbed the sharp edge of the sword with its hands out of Davis's hand and threw it. Davis just stared at it, horrified.

"Retreat!" Malcolm ordered.

We all ran to the right of it. It followed after us, making trees crash down beside it due to its large size.

Malcolm put his arm around me and guided me left. "This way, hurry."

Melvin and Kenny turned the other way, leading the creature away from us. Chase and Davis turned around and followed it.

"They are going to deal with it, I'm going to get you to safety." Malcolm pushed me further away from the creature.

"No, we have to," I began when I felt him pull me back. All of a sudden we both started sliding down the cliffside. We both screamed as we tumbled down into the rocky cliff below.

CHAPTER 28

I don't know how long I lost consciousness, but when I woke I found myself at the bottom of a cliff. Looking back up at where we slipped, I couldn't believe I was still alive. My body ached from all the rocks beating against my body and twigs snagging my clothes and hair. After I caught my breath once more, I tried to stand.

My body didn't want to stand, nor move really, and my leg screaming at me in pain. It felt like it was screaming, it really did. I fell back down. "Ow..."

I peered around, looking for Malcolm. He lay a few dozen feet in front of me.

"Malcolm, can you hear me?" I whispered.

He didn't budge. I crawled over to him. He was completely knocked out. I tried not to panic, finding myself in a situation that was dire. I had to take deep breaths and calm myself down.

"Malcolm." I shook him. "Wake up, we have to get out of here. Wake up!"

Still nothing. I felt his wrist and could feel a pulse, as we were taught in Middle School health class. At least he was alive. A roar echoed behind me. I glanced back to see trees swaying back and forth. That creature was coming this way. I quickly turned back to Malcolm.

"Wake up! Malcolm! Please, for the love of..."

The monster roared again. I grabbed Malcolm's arms and began to pull him in the opposite direction of where the sound was coming from. My leg exploded in pain.

"Please wake up, please!"

The creature came flying through the trees, its scream piercing my ears. I didn't know if it was the same one as before and if it was, I wondered where the others were.

I stayed still, hoping it couldn't see me like the T-rex on Jurassic Park, but that wasn't the case. It started flying straight for us.

Malcolm's eyes flickered open. "Oh, my head."

I pointed up. "Uh, Malcolm..."

“You have got to be kidding me.” He tried to stand but failed. “I think my leg is broken. Alice, run! Get out of here!”

“I’m not going to leave you here.”

“You will die if you stay here!”

I pulled out my katana. “No, Malcolm, you have saved me multiple times. It is my turn.”

I ignored the pain in my leg as I limped between Malcolm and the jabberwocky. The jabberwocky let out a fighting roar.

“No, I will not let you hurt my friend! I am sick of this place and I am not going to die by some stupid creature! I made it too far to die now!”

I charged at the creature, slower than I would have liked due to my leg. It dove down at me, claws extended. The katana clashed with its claws. I spun forward and sliced one of its feet completely off. I got it right at the joint for a clean cut.

The creature screamed in agony. It looked mad, its eyes glaring at me. It wanted revenge and wasn’t going to stop until it got it. It swooped down and attacked again, jaw open as if it was going to eat me right there. I jumped out of the way as its mouth came at me. I stabbed it straight in the eye. It screamed. It collapsed on the ground, trying to make the pain stop. Quickly I swung the katana right through the neck. The body fell along with its head, never to move again.

“Take that you stupid worthless piece of crap!” I yelled down at it. My adrenaline was high and I had about enough of everything in this forest.

The fight must have been too much for my body as I suddenly collapsed.

“Alice!” Malcolm yelled.

I lied on the ground, staring up at the trees. Everything seemed blurry, one green mess. Maybe it was always like that, I didn’t know. I just wanted to get out of there.

Where did I go wrong? What did I do in my life to deserve this? Getting kidnapped to a world that didn’t exist? Then having to face my darkest fears and then taken into this wretched place? I just wanted to go home.

“Alice, can you hear me?”

My eyes flickered open. I had thought my eyes were open but apparently that wasn’t the case. I blinked a couple of times and found Malcolm leaning over me.

“You did it! You killed the jabberwocky.” He smiled.

“I couldn’t let it kill you, now could I? Who would save me when I need help?”

He laughed. “Thank you.”

Malcolm stared into my eyes and I into his. It felt as if time had stopped for a moment as he leaned in closer and kissed me.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” Kenny’s voice broke the magical moment. Malcolm backed away and I saw everyone standing behind him. Chase was frowning. I blushed as I sat up. Apparently everyone was fine, that was great news.

“She killed the jabberwocky, no thanks to you guys. Where were you? Why didn’t you defeat the jabberwocky like you were supposed to?” Malcolm tried to stand and collapsed once more. “Davis, get over here!”

Davis scurried over and knelt down next to Malcolm. “What happened?”

“We fell down the cliffside. I think my leg is broken,” Malcolm explained.

Davis placed his hands over Malcolm’s leg and closed his eyes. After a few seconds he opened them again. “All good.”

To my amazement, Malcolm stood up without a problem.

“What just happened?” I asked. Davis hurried over to me.

“I can heal people, Alice.” Davis smiled as he placed his hands over me. “Just take a deep breath.”

It hurt badly. I could feel my sprained ankle fix itself. I bit my lip in pain, not wanting to seem like a weakling. But god it hurt.

“All done.” He stood up and looked at the jabberwocky. “You did this?”

I nodded as I stood. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Amazing!” Melvin came up beside me. “Not many people have gone against a jabberwocky and lived to tell the tale.”

“We aren’t out of this place yet, boys.” Malcolm straightened his collar. “Now, let’s get a move on it.”



Night finally came again, by then I had almost fallen asleep, but my mind was still racing, thinking of all the things that happened that day. The jabberwocky, the kiss. Mostly just the kiss was what I kept thinking about. I

didn't particularly want to think about the jabberwocky ever again. But the kiss, what did it mean? Was it just a 'yeah, we did it' kiss? Or did it mean something more than that?

Chase was taking first watch. he sat near the entrance staring out into the darkness. They had captured another trising and used it for light. This one put up less of a fight, which I was thankful for because it meant that it wouldn't try to kill us in the morning, at least that's what I hoped.

I went over and sat next to Chase. He didn't even glance at me.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked.

"Nope, my body wants to but my mind won't stop." I smiled.

"Thinking about that kiss?"

I couldn't believe he asked that. I looked down at the rocks beside my feet.

He spun around to face me. "What does he mean to you?"

"I... I don't know."

"You shouldn't like him, he isn't the man you think he is. He's cold and dark and nothing can bring him out of that. Not even *you*."

These words, they didn't describe Malcolm like I knew him. Malcolm had been kind since the moment I had met him. "What are you talking about? He is nice and sweet."

"If you knew him as well as I did, you would never say that. There's a darkness inside of him that will never leave, that is why Morpheus can't affect him, Malcolm's heart is much darker than that Circus leader could ever imagine. But it's your choice, just don't say I didn't warn you." Chase turned back away.

I opened my mouth to say something, but decided not to. I didn't want to gossip behind Malcolm's back. If I was going to find out about his past, I would ask him myself. Deciding to try and get some rest, I headed back to my spot and finally fell asleep.



Over the next two days, we made our way further towards the Circus. Never had my body been put through so much strain, not even in Becca's ballet classes. I was glad I was at least in shape to be able to walk so much, even though my arms and legs begged me to stop.

Nothing major attacked us again, thankfully. A couple of small birds pecked at us but Chase handled them like a pro. I wanted to comment on it but after our conversation, we didn't really talk. Flowers around us sang but at this point we were used to their sweet lullabies.

At last, I could see sunlight. It was setting in the distance, great reds and oranges making its way through the trees. I smiled.

"We did it, we are almost there," I said.

Kenny walked up next to me. "Now you will have to face Morpheus. You think you are ready?"

"Oh, after all that we have just gone through, I know I am ready. Let's go."

By the time we got out of the forest, the sun had set and the stars and carnival lights lit up the area. It glowed spectacularly just as it did last time, looking innocent and charming to the unsuspecting eye. But I knew better, I knew the truth. It was dangerous and dark and Morpheus would use any means necessary to get a person wrapped around his finger.

I wouldn't let him get away with it this time.

The moment we stepped through the entrance of the Circus, I knew this would be an all or nothing mission. Either we were going to beat Morpheus once and for all, or we would lose everything and Wonderland would cease to exist. It didn't bother me, the weight of the mission on my shoulders, because I had the one thing that Morpheus didn't.

Friends.

Malcolm stepped up beside me. "Are you sure about this?"

"As sure as I will ever be. Just trust me, okay? That's all that I ask of you," I said.

He nodded. "With everything I have to the very end."

I turned around to the other boys. "You all ready?"

They nodded.

I smiled. "Then let's bring this Circus down once and for all."

The sound of clapping made me turn my head to find Morpheus approaching us. "I have to admit, Alice, I didn't expect to see you walking in here ever again."

"You don't frighten me anymore, Morpheus, just give up now." I stood tall, not letting my body admit fear.

He just laughed. "My dear, you are delusional. I would never admit to defeat, and why would I need to? You could never conquer me, not here, not anywhere."

"That's where you are wrong, I have grown. I am stronger and I can defeat anything you throw at me."

Morpheus tilted his head. "Malcolm, are you going to let her destroy herself like this? You know I can take her to the point where not even you can bring her back."

"She won't need to be brought back," Malcolm said. "She's going to defeat you, I have no doubt in my mind."

He just smiled. "And I see you brought another friend. Kenny, isn't it? I remember looking inside your mind. There wasn't much there, now was there?"

Kenny stuck his tongue out at Morpheus.

"Well then, if you think you are ready, my dear child, I shall make the arrangements."

"The arrangements?" I questioned. I didn't remember him having to plan for me last time.

"Yes, because this time you are going to be my main show." He tapped his cane. "Now come, my customers are waiting."

We followed him towards the tent, a few of his workers joining us, making sure we weren't going to make a scene. I could tell Malcolm and the rest were nervous, but I didn't let their fear rub off on me. I had to stay strong because I knew exactly what I needed to beat Morpheus and if I lost that, then I lost everything.

The tent was crowded once again with people from all over Wonderland. Their faces all masked with darkness, I couldn't tell if they were enjoying themselves or not. I suppose they were since they were here. I wondered if they were in the ocean like I was when I was clouded in darkness, or if each of them had their own special place.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! Welcome to a show like no other! I will be taking you to a place where none have gone before, into the mind of my dear Alice here, a human from the real world. You will see the worries of those pathetic beings and see how much more advanced we are than them." Morpheus grinned. "And we will watch as she will fall into my hands once more."

Grabbing my hand, he brought me into the center of the arena. The boys tried to come with but guards kept them back. Thousands of eyes stared down at me and I felt my heart beat fiercely against my chest. It was just like a recital, all I had to do was my best.

Morpheus held up his hand and fireworks filled the arena. “Let the games begin!”

CHAPTER 29

Everyone cheered as the fireworks went off, rooting for more. Jugglers and people with hula hoops danced upon the tight wire, acrobats flung across the tent, and a unicyclist was eating fire while going around the arena. If this was a normal Circus, it would have been spectacular.

But it wasn't a normal Circus, it was evil, warped, and out to destroy the world, both mine and Wonderland.

The tent went dark. I could no longer see the crowd nor the performers. It was happening, I would have to face my fears once again.

And this time I wouldn't give in.

All of a sudden my house appeared in front of me. It seemed worn down, as if no one had been here in years. The windows were boarded, the paint peeling, and weeds littered the yard in every direction. Not sure what was going on, I went and opened the door.

"Mom?" I called out into the house. "Dad?"

After stepping inside, I could tell for sure that no one had been here in years. All the pictures we had in frames were now shadows on the walls and the furniture was torn to shreds, now a home for some creature.

I ran down the hall to my room and opened the door. All my paintings and belongings were still there. I quickly went and checked my parent's room and my sisters' room. There was nothing there. Why? How could that be possible?

"Mom! Dad!" I called out once again.

"They aren't there, they left." I could hear Morpheus voice in my ear.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Gone. They left you here. They couldn't stand being with you any more so they left," he explained.

They gave up on me? Why would they do that? I knew that they got mad at me, but in the end they would always be there for me, *right?*

I had a big fight with them before I came to Wonderland. Would that have really made them mad enough to leave me? I would bring my grades back up, I promised that. Kate had said she would study with me, it was all going to be okay.

Because this wasn't real.

I shook my head. "They wouldn't do that, my parents would have never done that to me."

"But they are nowhere to be seen, Alice, they couldn't stand your bad grades, your attitude. You are a disgrace to them."

"No, my parents love me and even though we don't agree, they know these are the things I want to do."

"They harp on you to stop wasting your time, you can't believe that they will support you in what you want to do."

"They may be hard on me, but that shows them I am passionate in what I believe in. They will come around, they always do."

"Fine," Morpheus' voice sounded mad. "They may not leave you." The scene changed, I was now at school. There was no one in the hallways, everyone was either in class or at the gym. "But what about dear Kate?"

"Alice," Kate appeared in the hallway. She frowned when she saw me and stomped over. "Where have you been?"

"I... I don't know," I said.

"Well, never mind that. You are late and are probably going to receive another detention. That's the third one this week!" she exclaimed. "I don't know what has gotten into you but you are turning into someone that I can't be friends with."

Detention? What the hell was going on? I mean, I have had a couple in the past due to being late but never that many in a week. "What do you mean?"

"I have straight A's, Alice, you barely pass your classes. I couldn't be friends with someone who always receives detentions all the time. It would ruin my reputation."

I shook my head. "Kate would never say that."

She put her hands on her hips. "Oh really? Then who am I?"

"You are my worst fear, the Kate that I hope will never come to be. The one who I fear will turn her back on me. But that is only a fear, I know for a fact that Kate would never leave me."

"Ugh, you are talking nonsense. You know, in reality, I should take your place. Your parents like me more than you anyway. You could just disappear and no one would notice."

"Kate would never say that, she is my friend."

Her mouth turned into a slight grin. "No one would notice."

"My best friend would never leave my side," I repeated again and again, letting it resound. "My best friend would never leave my side!"

The scene changed. I was no longer in the real world but in the Dark Forest. I had done it, I had successfully faced my fears of the real world. But why did I find myself here?

I stood alone, there was no one around me. I could hear creatures move around me, the fog taking over the land. My heart began to beat faster. How was I in here, how did I get in this wretched place again?

And why was I here? Although this was a scary place, it wasn't really a major fear of mine, so why was I here?

That's right, it was an illusion.

"Why are you all alone here, Alice?" Morpheus' voice echoed around me.

"I... I don't know."

"Your friends left you, they couldn't stand saving you any longer."

I shook my head. "No, they wouldn't do that. They wouldn't leave me."

"Take a look around, Alice. They aren't here."

"This is a trick. This isn't real. You should just give up now, I won't give into my fears anymore."

"Not real, you say? Tell that to creatures at your feet."

I looked down to see ten of the spider creatures that almost got me last time. I screamed and tried to kick them away.

"No one here to save you, just run Alice, run as fast as you can!"

I ran as he told me to, faster and faster into the woods. Twigs clawed at my skin, blood running down my arms. More and more spiders seemed to join the chase. I wanted to call out for help, but I knew no one would be coming.

I went past the flowers singing the lullabies, the blue lights calling to me to run off the cliff, other lights in the distance that were probably those fairy-things that wanted to kill me. I kept running nevertheless, as fast as I could manage.

Coming up to an opening, I stopped. I couldn't believe what I saw in front of me, a table covered in moss.

I found myself at the tea party once again.

I glanced behind me to find that all the terrors were gone, that there was nothing following me any longer.

The only thing I could hear was the sound of my own breath as I slowly approached the table and chairs. Then I realized what was odd about all of this, why it wasn't things that I feared in my dreams.

"I'm inside Malcolm's mind," I whispered.

"You are smarter than I give you credit for." Morpheus appeared in front of me. He looked as cocky as usual. "I didn't think you would ever figure this out."

"The spiders were Chase's fear, he was afraid of what if he didn't save me in time."

"Very good," Morpheus slid his fingers over the moss that covered the table. "Now you must be asking yourself, why is Malcolm afraid of this place? And more importantly, why is he afraid of you finding out?"

"I... I don't know."

"The answer is hidden away under all this moss." He smiled. "All you have to do is take it off and all the answers will be given to you."

Slowly, I took a step closer and placed my hand on the soft moss. It was appealing to me, knowing everything about Malcolm. He had so many secrets that had been hinted at, that I had asked about, but no one gave away any secrets. I just wanted to know what could have been so bad that even Chase didn't trust him, things that the original Alice took him out of and helped him through.

The moss would be easy to take away, it wouldn't take that much effort. I could just pick it up and be able to have all the answers revealed.

But I knew I couldn't.

I shook my head. "No, he is my friend! I would never do this to him!"

Morpheus appeared next to me and whispered into my ear. "He is hiding such darkness from you. Don't you want to know, don't you have the right to know?"

"His past doesn't matter to me, but who he is today. He is sweet and kind and cares about everyone! He cares about me!" I shut my eyes. "Friends trust each other and I know they feel the same! My friends will always be here for me and I will always be there for them!"

I heard Morpheus scream as something threw him back. I opened my eyes to find myself on a beach. The waves gently came upon the shore.

“Where am I?” I whispered. “What is this?”

“Why, you are me,” a young voice said behind me.

I turned around to find a young girl with long blonde hair smiling.

“Alice?” I questioned.

She laughed. “That’s me!”

“I don’t understand.”

“You realized the truth in yourself that Morpheus can’t defeat. You realized not only how much power friendship has in your heart, but how much power you have within.” she pulled out a clear orb that shined greatly. “And with that, you will be able to save Wonderland.” she handed me the orb. “This is the power of your heart. Use it well.”

As quickly as I appeared, I was pulled back into the Circus.

“You!” Morpheus pointed at me. “You ruined everything!”

He pulled a rapier out and charged at me. I started for my katana but the clash of another sword hitting it distracted me. Malcolm and Chase stood between me and Morpheus.

“We don’t think so,” Chase grinned. “You are finished once and for all.”

“Give up Morpheus,” Malcolm said as Melvin, Davis, and Kenny surrounded Morpheus. “Your reign is over.”

Morpheus shook his head. “No, it will never be over.”

He placed his sword back into his cane and slammed it against the ground. A puff of smoke engulfed him and he was gone.

CHAPTER 30

“He’s gone!” Melvin waved the smoke away. There was no trace of Morpheus. The boys all turned to me, smiling.

Malcolm picked me up and spun me around. “You did it, Alice! You defeated him! He’s running away with his tail between his legs. Ha!”

I blushed. “It was only because of you.” I turned to the others. “Because of all of you. Your friendship led me to believe I could defeat anything. I knew you all would always be there for me, and I for you. Morpheus can control people by their fear and I realized that having faith in not only my friends, but myself, I could defeat anything.”

Chase pointed at the orb. “What’s that?”

“Oh,” I looked down at the strange orb. I had almost forgotten about it. “Alice gave it to me.”

Kenny held out his hand. “Let me see it.”

I handed it to him and he examined it. “If I’m not mistaken, this is the orb that got destroyed during the Red and White war.”

“What?” Melvin exclaimed as he took it from Kenny. “This can’t be it. I saw it get destroyed.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Malcolm grabbed the orb. “There was a powerful orb that the two kingdoms fought for. It was said to be able to bring all peace, or all destruction, depending on who held it.” He handed it to me. “Make your choice, Alice gave it to you.”

I stared at it, not sure what to do with it. But, as if someone whispered the thought into my mind, I threw it at the ground, shattering it into thousands of little pieces. The moment it hit the ground, a flash brighter than any light I had ever seen, went out into every direction. I jumped back, covering my eyes.

The light dimmed down and once my eyes finally adjusted, I looked around. Chase’s eyes widened as the light came back to normal. Murmurs through the audience echoed in the arena.

“What was that?” Davis squeaked as he stood up.

“I don’t know,” Kenny’s eyes narrowed as he peered around. He smiled. “Oh ho! Will you look at that!”

We all turned to see the audience staring at us. Staring. There was no longer darkness covering their face. We shouted in joy.

“We did it!” Melvin shouted. “We finally did it!”

Our joy ran short when Bill entered the arena. We all turned quiet, when we noticed his face was also clear.

Malcolm stepped in front of him. “Bill.”

Bill looked at us for a moment, then smiled. “We are free.” he laughed and hugged him. “You sly dog, you did it!”

“Good to see you in a better mood,” Malcolm said.

Melvin, Davis, and Chase went up to talk to Bill but Kenny just stood next to me.

“Nice to see everything is back to normal,” Kenny said.

“Yes.” I watched as the others talked to Bill. “But Morpheus is still out there.”

“He has no power now, not after you broke that orb. I still don’t understand how you got it but I’m sure happy you did.”

“Alice gave it to me, she must have known you all would have needed it later,” I laughed. “This place is so strange, it makes no sense. But I like it, it’s a breath of fresh air away from reality.”

“So question is.” Kenny looked at me through the corner of his eye. “Where are you going to go next?”

I looked back at Malcolm and the others. I forgot, I would have to go back, away from this place. I worried about home and being gone, but I never thought about having to leave this place. Truth was I loved it here, now that people weren’t after me. This place could be nice, especially with my new friends.

“Alice,” Chase called. “Come on, we need to leave.”

I hurried over. “What do you mean?”

“We have to report all of this to the king and queen, of course,” Bill said. He glanced at Kenny, a little grin appearing on his lips. “Now that you have saved us.”

Chase grabbed my hand and suddenly we were in front of the palace. I could appreciate the beauty of it better now that I didn’t have to worry

about my head getting chopped off. Paper lanterns hung in space all around us. A figure came running out towards us.

“Alice!” the queen called. “Malcolm, you did it!”

Malcolm and the others bowed in front of the Queen.

“All as expected for the Queen’s head servant,” Malcolm said.

“You will be heavily rewarded.” She looked at us all. “All of you.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Malcolm bowed again.

“As for you.” The Queen stepped in front of me. “I don’t know how, but you defeated Morpheus and restored Wonderland. How will I ever repay you?”

“Oh.” I blushed. “I don’t want anything in return, it was these boys really.”

She smiled. “Oh, I’m sure you handled a great deal of it. These boys never had been able to work together before.”

“Really,” I asked. “That’s surprising.”

“You must be one amazing girl,” she winked. “Now, shall we head inside?”

We nodded and followed the Queen inside. This time I was able to really relax as I strolled through the palace with the others. It was still as magnificent as when I entered the first time, and it was a relief to be able to see the face of everyone who passed. They all smiled at us, bowing thanks as they went on with their work. It felt great to have done something for others, and even if I wasn’t given praise like this, I still would have done it.

As we went further down the corridors, something caught my eye and I stopped. Everyone kept forward as I peered down the adjacent corridor. A small figure stood in the distance. The White Rabbit.

Without thinking, I followed him. Once he saw me heading to him, he turned around and started running. I ran after him. I don’t know what the driving force was that caused me to do that, but I did. I ran after him. Maybe it was just curiosity.

He disappeared around a corner and once I made it around it, he was gone. There was only one door at the end of the hall. I stepped to it, slowly, my mind only focusing on the door.

I slid it open to find the only thing in the room being a mirror. It was large, elegant, I had never seen something so beautiful. Standing in front of it, I heard the door shut behind me. I spun around to see the White Rabbit.

“You aren’t supposed to still be here, Alice, you are supposed to leave,”
he said.

“What do you mean?” I backed away from him.

“Goodbye Alice.” He shoved me and I fell back.

CHAPTER 31

My eyes opened and I found my Tardis alarm clock wheezing and groaning. I pushed the top of it and turned it off. The smell of oil paint filled my nostrils. I looked around, confused. My paintings were scattered across the room, dirty clothes all over the floor.

I was home.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to remember what happened. Wonderland. *No, that couldn't have been possible.* I shook my head. *It was a dream. It had to have been a dream.* Too many fumes in my room, I should probably air it out in here.

Rolling over, I brought the covers over my head, letting the warmth protect me. It couldn't have been real, it was ridiculous.

But something in the back of my mind kept saying it was real.

I finally pulled myself out of bed and got ready for the day. I was to meet Kate downtown and we were going to go shopping. I wanted to get my mind off of my recent grades, but for some reason it didn't bother me like it did last night. Maybe due to what I just witnessed, it didn't matter anymore.

My mom dropped me off near Nordstrom's and I hurried inside. It was pouring down raining now and I hated the feeling of wet clothes, especially when it was really cold out as well. The dampness reminded me of my dream. The Dark Forest was always damp but at least it wasn't cold. I shook the thoughts out of my head. *It wasn't real, what was I thinking?*

I found Kate near the Free People section and hurried over to her. After our usual hug, she looked at me. "You look different, Alice."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that a good thing?"

She smiled. "Yes, you look more confident."

"Actually, I feel a lot better. I had a fight yesterday with my parents, but for some reason I woke up feeling refresh."

We spent the rest of the day looking through clothes, eating lunch at Golden Crown, and finished up the afternoon going through the antique store that we swore a ghost lives in. We even stopped by the comic-book store that carries high-class signed comics, one in particular I liked I wished

I could afford. A Stan Lee signed *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the first introduction to Doctor Connors, aka, Lizard Man. Only a couple thousand dollars, that's all...

Kate's mom picked us up and we ate dinner at Christo's, a nice little pizza and pasta place. Then we retired back to her house and watched, ironically, Syfy channel's *Alice*. It was Kate's pick, not mine.

As we watched the three-hour long miniseries, we came upon the jabberwocky.

I threw a piece popcorn at the TV. "That's not what the jabberwocky looks like."

Kate gave me a look. "What did you say?"

"That's not what it looks like."

"It's a creature from a fairy tale, how would you know what it looks like?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know, I just do."

"You are silly, Alice."

We finished the series and ended up having a *Teen Titan* marathon. Sunday went by as well and we finished up homework that was due that Monday. Kate's mom dropped me back off at home, and after proving to my parents that I had finished my homework and Kate reassuring them it was perfect, I went into my room and painted.

I painted what I remembered from the dream; the Dark Forest, the Kingdom of Dreams, the Circus. I decided to use watercolors for each of them, and opened my window to get the lingering oil paint smell out of my room. It never seemed to leave. Once I was finished, I used a hairdryer to make sure the colors were as deep as I wanted them, then finally went to bed.

Monday morning came and I got to school and emptied my bag in my locker, the books making a loud thunk as I shoved them on the top shelf. Kate stood by, all ready to go to first period.

"Oh, look Alice! It's your boyfriend," she poked fun at me as she did everyday.

I glanced over to see Malcolm and the others putting their books away as well. Malcolm looked over and I blushed.

"He's not my boyfriend, you know that."

"But your cheeks get so red when I say things like that." She laughed.

I shut my locker and started for class. “You are so mean, Kate.”

As we were almost to our room, I felt someone’s hand on my shoulder. Turning around I found Malcolm standing right behind me.

“After all that we have been through, you don’t even say hi to me?” He smiled.

I stared at him for a moment, thinking. No, it couldn’t have been real. Chase, Melvin, and Davis came up behind him. I grinned and flung my arms around Malcolm.

“It was real!” I laughed. “And you came back!”

“Of course we did, Alice, you don’t think we would leave our favorite girl behind.” Chase grinned.

“Um, Alice,” Kate said as she saw my arms around Malcolm. “Did I miss something?”

“No, you missed nothing at all.”

“Okay,” she pointed down the hall. “But you do see those girls running towards you as if they are going to attack.”

I quickly ducked into the classroom, happy to know my friends were still with me and everything wasn’t just a dream. Chase and Davis sat next to me along with Kate. I smiled, happy to have such great friends.

With them, I knew I could overcome anything.



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Her hobbies include reading, watching anime, cooking, studying different languages, wire walking, tinkering with her violin and concertina, and volunteering at the library. She lives in Seattle with her husband and two cats.

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